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OUR VICAR.

A Novel.

BY

WYNTER FRORE KNIGHT, B.C.L.

IN THREE VOLUMES.

VOL. II.



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OUR VICAR.



CHAPTER I.

A PLOT.

PLAINTON had not been to Dargal Lodge for some time. He had met Miss Melody at one of the picnics organised by Fred Monmouth, and on several occasions at the Broughams.' He had also seen her at an evening party given by Dr. Jolly. He had had some conversation with her each time, and felt his first opinion confirmed that the girl was living at home in an uncongenial atmosphere.

She excited a good deal of attention at Dr.

Jolly's. She was dressed wholly in white, and her abundant black hair was relieved by a single pink camellia. She seemed to enjoy herself on the whole, but at times relapsed into that strange, abstracted mood which the curate had so often noticed before. Then she would, after a time, rouse herself with a little start, and the melancholy, saddened smile habitual to her would appear again in her face. Plainton heard several of the guests asking who she was, for scarcely any one seemed to know her.

As she was sitting alone by the door of the conservatory, he crossed over to her and asked after her family. Her mother had not been well, and Dr. Jolly had been attending her. She added :

‘Mamma would be glad to see you, Mr. Plainton, if you come our way, although she can hardly expect you to call often, as she is not a parishioner.’

‘I will certainly call soon.’

He did so in the following week, and finding her much better had not called again.

One summer evening, as he was walking by the river in the direction of the Lodge, he met Arthur Melody, who insisted upon the curate calling, as his mother and sister were quite alone for the rest of the evening, and would be glad to see him. Mr. Melody, it appeared, had come down from town with Mr. Fortescue to an early dinner at five o'clock. They had both just left—the latter to return to town, and the former to settle some business which would keep him out late.

Arthur took Plainton through the Lodge on to the lawn, where he found Miss Melody sitting by the lindens enjoying the cool evening breeze and the drowsy scents from the shrubbery. She was dressed in her favourite white, and wore her large gold cross. Smiling a welcome upon the visitor, she said :

‘What a time it is since you or Miss Plainton called !’

‘Is it? I have not noticed—I have been so busy.’

‘We know you have a great deal to do,

but you ought to think of your health a little.'

'Well, I do not wish to neglect it. But worry and disappointment tell on me more than actual hard work.'

'I hope there is nothing very serious to worry you just now.'

'No—not very—but people's prejudices and stupidity are very trying. For instance, I have had the greatest difficulty in getting clean surplices for the choir, as I am told that if we have them washed too often people will think we are becoming Ritualists !'

Mona laughed, and said :

'Then I suppose dirt must be considered a mark of sound theological principles.'

'For the same reason I cannot get the church properly dusted, because if I am so very particular in these matters, it will certainly be concluded that I am not a safe man.'

Mona laughed outright.

'More than that. I have been wishing that when the offertory is collected the

churchwardens and sidesmen should bring it up in an orderly manner, walking behind one another in two lines, instead of stumbling over one another and making a sort of scramble and free fight with the bags. But this proposition was received with uplifted hands of horror, and I was told that this would be only organising a Ritualistic procession, and that half the congregation would probably resign their sittings rather than sanction such a deliberate insult to sound Protestantism.'

'How absurd !'

'I have also proposed,' continued the curate, with rueful face, 'that the church should be opened every day for private prayer, and what do you think was the reply ?'

'I can hardly imagine.'

'I was asked if the doctor had felt my pulse lately, as such a proposition could only come from a man who had fever hanging about him, if it did not originate with one who was inclined to dally with the woman of Babylon. It is very trying to one's patience,' said Plainton, rubbing his head.

Presently Miss Melody observed :

‘ Mr. Plainton, I heard a great discussion about you the other day !’

‘ I dare say. I have unfortunately caused more discussion at times than I wished.’

‘ Oh ! there was no harm in this ; it was only funny !’

‘ Pray tell me what it was.’

‘ Well, I will, as I do not think it will offend you ; but I will mention no names. One said you were Low Church, another maintained with equal vehemence that you were High, while a third said the other two were quite wrong, as you were certainly Broad. And each proved the other two wrong, both by what you had said and done.’

‘ And what do *you* think ?’

‘ Oh ! I don’t know. If I were to state what I think, I should say that you do not care to pin your faith to any party, but would accept the truth wherever it was to be found, and follow it wherever it might lead, and would adopt any practice which you thought

might prove beneficial, whoever might have introduced or used it.'

Mona spoke these words with unconscious emphasis and unwonted energy, looking straight before her as if taking part in some imaginary discussion.

'Thank you, Miss Melody. When I go to a new curacy I shall send the vicar to you for my theological opinions.'

A faint pink flush came into the pale cheek of Mona as she recovered her former self. Looking at Plainton with her large, dark, lustrous eyes, she said, softly :

'But you are not thinking of leaving Polington, are you ?'

'Not at present. But I am haunted by continual doubts as to my usefulness. I like the people exceedingly, and no man could be treated with greater kindness than I have been.'

'You are of great use to many, from all I have heard,' said she, gazing far away as if to some distant horizon, a peculiar look Plainton had often seen before in her expressive face.

He did not speak immediately, not wishing to break her sudden reverie. It was now past the gloaming, and the stars were beginning to show themselves. There was one bright, throbbing star upon which Mona had fixed her gaze. It seemed to fascinate her. One hand hung listless by her side, the face gradually grew more flushed, the eyes glowed with a soft loving light, the full red lips slightly parted asunder, and moved gently as if conversing with some spiritual intelligence too subtle to be perceived by the grosser senses. Plainton looked at her with admiration and awe. He felt as if he were in the presence of a being from a higher and better world. He could not have spoken had he wished. The whole scene acted like a spell upon him. The dark violet sky, the soft subduing light of the stars, the fantastic weird outlines of the trees, the magic presence of Mona and her strange and rapt aspect, were all parts of one harmonious whole which enchanted and awed him.

Suddenly Mona trembled violently, a change passed over her face, the lips closed, the fea-

tures grew rigid and pallid, and a shadow of agony crossed them, as involuntarily clasping her hands she exclaimed, with a low, plaintive wail :

‘ Oh ! no, no ! Don’t, don’t !’

‘ Miss Melody !’ said Plainton, starting up, alarmed, ‘ you are unwell. What is it ?’

Mona made a great effort to recover herself, but her thoughts, whatever they were, had been too painfully real, and sobbing softly to herself she said :

‘ It is nothing, Mr. Plainton. The evening is close. I am all right now,’ she added, rising and speaking in her usual dignified manner. ‘ Let us go in.’

‘ Why, my child,’ said Mrs. Melody, as they entered the drawing-room, ‘ how pale you are ! You look as if you had seen a ghost.’

‘ So I have,’ said Mona to herself, with a slight shudder. Turning to her mother with a smile : ‘ Mr. Plainton has been making me laugh about his troubles.’

‘ Well, you are a nice comforter.’

‘ Oh ! but the troubles he told me are only heavy enough to tickle one.’

‘ You had better give Mr. Plainton a glass of wine and take some yourself.’

Plainton left shortly after. He did not go out of the front gate, but as the night was tempting he thought he would walk through the long straggling garden, and let himself out at the other end by the gardener’s gate, which opened from within and shut with a spring.

There was a path running the whole way round the garden, bounded on the outer side by flower-beds and shrubs, and on the inner by the edge of the grass plat. At parts the trees were very thick. Under one clump at the farther end near the gate was an old-fashioned summer-house with a table and chairs. It was completely screened from observation by the overhanging trees, and was seldom used. It stood on the grass a few feet from the edge, with its back towards the gate. As Plainton walked noiselessly along the grass he heard, as he approached the

summer-house, two people earnestly talking. Who had any right there at this hour? His first impulse was to go back and tell Mrs. Melody; on second thoughts he would go nearer and satisfy himself that he need disturb the family. He advanced quietly towards the back of the rustic shelter, and listened. Two men were smoking and talking.

‘You should try to see her a little oftener, Dick. She has lived a good deal to herself, and wants humouring.’

‘Look here, Melody, I have tried all sorts of ways with her, and am tired of it. You saw how she treated me at dinner.’

‘That was entirely your own doing, for behaving as if you had a right to her.’

‘So I have. You have had the money, and I have a right to the goods. But she hates the very sight of me.’

‘Come, come, you must have a little patience.’

‘Parker says the pale-faced parson turns up pretty often. You don’t think she has a fancy that way, do you?’

The other gave a short laugh. 'Not in the least. Parson is not a marrying man—half-starved, I believe—and lives mostly on charity.'

'Why the deuce does he come to the house?'

Melody laughed again. 'Madam likes it.'

'Why?'

'She says he sweetens the house after you have been in it.'

His companion muttered an oath.

'But I believe the chief reason is,' continued Melody, 'that it gives the Lodge a respectable air in the eyes of the neighbours.'

The ardent lover of Mona briefly consigned the neighbours to perdition. Then raising his voice, he said in a determined tone:

'Well, Melody, you must put on more pressure, as I do not intend to be baffled.'

'Hush! Don't speak so loud. What would you have me do?'

'Make her give in. A girl will do a lot to save her family. Put it in that way.'

‘ I have said as much as I dare on that score. I will make another attempt, and if it comes to the worst, Parker——’ here the speaker sank his voice so low that Plainton could not hear a word.

Presently he spoke a little louder, and the curate caught parts of sentences :

‘ Mrs. Eugénie has more influence with her than her own mother—— Let us wait—— see her again next week——don’t be quite so violent——’

‘ What’s the time?’ at length asked the other ; ‘ I must catch the last train.’

‘ You have plenty of time. I’ll walk with you. I have to see Parker to-night, as I must be off by an early train in the morning.’

As soon as Plainton had discovered that he was listening to some foul plot against the peace of Mona, he felt justified in remaining. He now walked quickly and quietly on till he reached the gate, when he let himself out as gently as he could.

He asked himself what it could all mean ? He did not doubt that he had unexpectedly

come upon Mr. Melody and his friend from town, who, instead of returning after his rebuff at dinner, had probably turned into the forsaken summer-house with his host to talk over the matter.

Plainton could not take action on what he had heard, nor, indeed, mention it to any one. But he might try to be of use to the girl, who seemed to be absolutely without a trustworthy friend in the world. He resolved to keep a watch on the Lodge as far as he could, and let Miss Melody know of any danger he might discover.

How strangely are the threads of our lives interwoven with those of others ! The curate had fully determined not to become intimate at Dargal Lodge, yet it would seem as if some unseen power were compelling him to become acquainted with the lives of its inmates, and were forcing him to act on his knowledge.

One important fact he had learnt that night, the existence of which he never before suspected : Miss Melody had a lover ! How he wished she had one worthy of her ! Who

was this man that dared speak of her in such unseemly terms? How could any one, however degraded in morals, refuse the homage of respect and reverence to a being so pure, so innocent, so beautiful and commanding as Mona Melody? For she was not a girl who attracts by mere prettiness, but a queen who compels admiration and demands submission by the force of stately manner, dignified bearing, and intellectual power.

Plainton thought he had never met a woman whose body and mind seemed so completely to answer to one another. The casket was worthy of the precious jewel it contained. May heaven shield her! Invoking this blessing on her head, he fell asleep.

The incidents of the day had made a deep impression on him, and assuming fantastic shapes mingled with his dreams.

As a boy he had been very fond of the 'Mord d'Arthur,' and after reading it had vowed he would live, as far as circumstances permit, like one of King Arthur's brave knights. In his dreams this night the vow was fulfilled.

He went forth to redress wrongs, to aid the distressed, to fight against evil wherever it was to be found—whatever dreadful shape it might assume.

He had gone forth alone. He was walking over hill and dale—but such a pleasant road ! It was covered the whole way with close, soft grass like velvet. How he enjoyed the sun, the air, and the sky ! Presently he came to a large house embedded in trees. The door at the main entrance was open, and he entered. He found himself in a lofty, sumptuously-furnished room. A beautiful girl, dressed all in white, her bosom adorned with a large gold cross, outlined with sparkling diamonds, came towards him,—and holding out her hand, said with a sweet smile :

‘ You have come at last ! I have waited for you so long !—oh, so long ! But come and rest, and I will bring you some fruit !’

He rested and took some refreshment, and then they walked out on to the lawn.

‘ Come into the summer-house !’ said his companion.

‘ Oh ! no, not there ! It is so dark. Let us stay in the beautiful sun,’ he replied.

They walked on the soft grass, hand in hand. He observed that she wore on her head a splendid wreath of diamonds and pearls. Whilst he was admiring it two fierce-looking men suddenly made towards them, followed at a little distance by a black giant, who was tall enough to keep all the sun off them.

The two men seized hold of the beautiful girl, when Plainton immediately cut one down and put his foot on his neck ; the other assailant ran away. When he looked up again from his fallen foe the lovely maiden was at some little distance ; for the black giant had one arm round her slender waist and was dragging her away. She held out her hands entreatingly towards her defender, and he forthwith essayed to follow her, but found he could not move. The man’s blood he had shed had congealed and held his feet fast to the ground. He could only look on the sad, entreating face of the despairing girl as she

gradually vanished in the distance. Madened and horrified at this, he struggled more violently than ever. He was beginning to move at last ; one more effort and he would be free. Gathering all his strength, he threw his body forward—and woke. He opened his eyes: Margaret, in her night-dress, was standing by his bed.

‘ Oh ! Pawley, you have been making such a noise, and I have had such a job to wake you !’

‘ I’m very sorry,’ said he, only half awake ; ‘ the blood did stick so.’

‘ Good gracious ! what do you mean ?’

‘ Eh ! I don’t mean nothing,’ he returned, quite oblivious of grammatical propriety in his sleepiness. ‘ What are you making such a noise about ?’ he asked in the tone of a child awakened out of his first sleep.

‘ You may well ask that. The people next door have sent in to know if you are ill and want anything.’

‘ Dear me ! I am very sorry, really,’ said the dreamer, somewhat ashamed of the stir he

had caused, and making a violent effort to get his eyes open again.

‘Didn’t you hear the policeman knocking at the door? He thought a burglar had got in, and that some one was crying for help.’

‘Oh dear, I am so sorry,’ feeling still more remorseful, and managing to squint through one eye.

‘I believe you have been murdering some one in your sleep.’

‘No, indeed. He wanted to murder Mona,’ lucidly explained her brother, who was nearly off again, ‘and I wouldn’t let him.’

‘It’s quite useless to talk to you,’ said Margaret, in a disgusted tone, ‘but it is really too bad.’

‘So sorry. Go to bed, Margaret, and don’t make a noise; you’ll disturb the neighbours. Spoiling my dream for nothing,’ he murmured as the door closed. ‘I shan’t be able to catch them up now—quite out of sight—qui—’ and he turned over to dream again.



CHAPTER II.

PRE-ZAMZUMMIC EXPLORATIONS.

ONE morning as the curate was making his way towards MacNaught's house, he saw in the distance before him what appeared to be one of the originals of the figures of saints painted by mediæval artists. He discerned a tall, gaunt personage in a long, loose garment, staff in hand, and with what seemed like a glory surrounding the head. There was a four-footed beast walking docilely by the side of the saint, and Plainton exclaimed : ' How like the figures of St. Jerome and the lion ! ' But suddenly the four-footed beast ceased to move onwards, when the saint gave it several smart pokes and whacks with the long staff.

Finding this of no avail, the energetic ascetic, placing the staff on the ground, took hold of the tail of the animal with both hands, and twisting it round and round until it looked very much like a gigantic chignon, endeavoured by that means to propel the stationary beast.

Plainton had now come near enough to see that the mediæval saint was none other than Mrs. Hatter, wearing a gigantic straw hat on the back of her head, which looked in the distance like a broad halo, and the refractory beast was an obstinate donkey, upon which was seated little Hetty, who was vigorously kicking her heels into the immovable flank of her new plaything.

As Plainton came up he asked :

‘Is this the donkey what wouldn’t go?’

‘It is at present,’ said Mrs. Hatter ; ‘but we intend to make him go shortly.’

She thereupon took up her staff and discharged a rapid volley of pokes and sounding thumps ; then suddenly dropping it, ran to the

tail and recommenced the curling process, while Hetty kicked and shouted :

‘ Come up, sir ! come up ! ’

But the beast did not move an inch.

‘ Here, Mr. Plainton—you use the stick, while I stick to the tail,’ said Mrs. Hatter, quite unconscious of her pun ; ‘ between us he must go.’

The curate took the staff and gently rubbed the ears and shoulder of Neddy.

‘ Oh ! that’s of no use ; you might as well try to tickle a brick wall,’ said the venerable saint.

‘ I don’t like to strike dumb animals.’

‘ Oh ! rubbish ! Here then, come and push behind while I twist the tail. I don’t think he can stand so much pressure at one point.’

Plainton pushed as hard as he could, but as for convenience he exerted his strength almost at right angles to the spinal cord instead of in a line with it, the donkey, as a sort of compromise, allowed his hind-quarters to be moved, but not his forelegs, which remained firmly fixed in the road ; his body, by the con-

tinued pressure of Plainton and Mrs. Hatter, gradually revolving round them as on a pivot. When they had pushed the tail round to the place where the head ought to be they paused and took breath.

‘If he goes forward now,’ said Mrs. Hatter reflectively, ‘we shall be going away from the Vicarage, and shall be worse off than before.’

‘Perhaps he would allow himself to be pushed backwards,’ suggested the curate.

‘I really do not know what is to be done,’ said the Vicarage saint, scratching her head with the end of the stick.

At that moment Plainton caught sight of some thistles in the hedge.

‘Happy thought!’ he shouted; ‘moral suasion and thistles, I think, will be irresistible.’

He put on his glove, plucked some, and offered them to the refractory animal. The latter gave a sniff and made a bite, but Plainton pulled the tempting morsel away, and the infatuated beast moved after it. Plainton cunningly described a curve which at last

brought the head of the donkey round towards the Vicarage. He then let him eat a little, and continued walking on. By this means Neddy was brought right up to the Vicarage door without further mishap.

Later on in the day he had occasion to call at the Vicarage, and found Mrs. Hatter and Hetty busily occupied in the drawing-room. Mrs. Hatter had a large manuscript folio outspread on the table, in which she was making some entries. Hetty had her little wagon filled with small pieces of cardboard, on each of which was inscribed a strange character. Plainton at first thought it was a collection of original drawings by Hetty. He was soon undeceived.

‘We are very busy, as you see,’ said Mrs. Hatter.

‘I hope I have not interrupted you.’

‘Oh! we do not mind you. But we don’t want any of those dreadful district visitors poking their noses in here to spy out the land. I think we are safe, however, as there is a *fête* at Tonford this afternoon.’

‘I saw a good many going that way,’ said the curate, looking with a curious eye at Hetty’s wagon.

‘Ah! I dare say you wonder what we are doing?’

‘Something very useful I am sure,’ said Plainton, politely.

‘Oh! very. I think Mr. Hatter told you about his discovery beneath the foundations of Rabbah?’

‘Yes. He said he was about to bring away copies of valuable inscriptions and tablets.’

‘Ah! unfortunately,’ said Mrs. Hatter, accidentally putting her long forefinger to the side of her nose, ‘they were all destroyed. The night before he was going to remove them, some wandering Arabs entered the place and destroyed every vestige of the Pre-Zamzummic remains.’

‘What a misfortune!’

‘Yes, but not irreparable. Everything is possible to genius.’

‘Well, a good deal is, I know.’

‘But this is a great secret, and must go no

further. Mr. Hatter has written down a good many inscriptions from memory, and what he cannot remember Hetty and I are supplying.'

Plainton opened his eyes in the utmost amazement.

'Hetty!' he exclaimed.

'Yes, Hetty,' continued Mrs. Hatter, with a grim smile. 'The most difficult portion of the work was cutting the cardboard, for my scissors are so blunt. That wagon is the oracle of the god who favours our literary inquiries.'

The curate still looked mystified.

'You will see it all presently. I have put in that wagon there, three or four pre-Zamzummic alphabets——'

'But where did you get your copy?' interrupted Plainton.

'That is perfectly easy. Mr. Hatter wrote down such characters as he could remember, the rest we discovered ourselves.'

'Really? What! in England?'

'In our inner consciousness,' solemnly rejoined Mrs. Hatter, pointing to her breast. 'And all I can say is, if the pre-Zamzummic

alphabet did not agree with the one we have discovered, so much the worse for the pre-Zamzummims. Ours is undoubtedly the one they ought to have used.'

'But would it not be awkward if the original—that is, if another alphabet were discovered, also claiming to be the genuine one?'

'Not at all,' calmly rejoined Mrs. Hatter. 'Mr. Hatter will prove all others to be spurious. Besides, he has taken good care that no further vestiges shall be discovered—at any rate, at Rabbah, or in its neighbourhood. Capital fellows those Bedouins!'

'Oh!'

'Now I will show you how we discover the inscriptions,' said Mrs. Hatter, placing her pen behind her ear, and standing with her hands behind her, as she looked at the wagon with a critical eye. 'Trot along, Hetty!'

Hetty galloped round the table with it.

'That will do,' said her mother. Stooping down she gave the wagon two or three vertical shakes, and finally took up a handful of the pieces of cardboard, which she spread out

before her haphazard on the table in two or three rows. These she carefully copied into the folio, and then threw the letters back into the wagon.

‘Two more words will complete this tablet. Trot along, Hetty!’ The process described was repeated.

Turning to Plainton, Mrs. Hatter triumphantly exclaimed :

‘There! that tablet is completely restored, and is quite as interesting as those which were destroyed.’

‘But how will you manage to translate it?’

‘We shall not manage at all. That task will be left for a future generation. It is not advisable that we should do *our* work and that of posterity into the bargain.’

‘I see!’

‘The introduction to the book containing an account of Mr. Hatter’s explorations of Rabbah, together with the plates and copies of the remarkable and mystic inscriptions which we are now preparing, will sell the work, and that is the chief matter. Mr.

Hatter expects that it will cause a great deal of controversy, especially in Germany.'

'I should think most likely it would.'

'It is to be hoped so.'

On leaving the Vicarage Plainton proceeded to pay the visit to MacNaught which had been frustrated in the morning. After singing one or two songs to him, he got on to more serious topics.

The man was evidently getting weaker, and the curate was anxious to lead him to fix his thoughts on the land beyond the grave and far out of reach of Death. He was glad to find that his patient was not unwilling to receive instruction. After praying with him, he left with the promise to go again soon.

He visited him several times after this, and succeeded at last in leading him to the Consoler of the weary and heavy-laden.

MacNaught twice received the Holy Communion, and gently fell asleep in the humble but firm assurance of a joyful resurrection.



CHAPTER III.

HETTY'S DONKEY.

IN the following week Plainton had occasion to go to the church to get a baptismal certificate. Whilst he was waiting outside the door, he saw Mrs. Langley talking to Hetty in the road. Hetty had been till that moment by herself playing with the dirt. Now Mrs. Langley was the only one of the district visitors who maintained that Hetty was an amiable child. She had never known her behave rudely, and she courageously defended her against all comers.

‘Come now, Hetty dear, shake hands with me, and tell me how papa is.’

‘I shan’t!’

‘Hush ! you must not use such naughty words, my dear.’

‘I shall.’

‘Shake hands, now ; come.’

‘I shan’t.’

‘I am very sorry you are so naughty. I must leave you till you are better.’

‘Glad to get rid of you.’

‘Good-bye, Hetty.’

‘I shan’t.’

Mrs. Langley walked slowly on, but she had not gone far when Hetty, taking up a good-sized flint stone, flung it with great precision at Mrs. Langley’s back, and hit her with some force between the shoulders. Mrs. Grimm, who happened to be passing at the time, clapped her hands with delight, and said, with a sweet smile, to Mrs. Langley :

‘What an amiable darling she is, is she not ? So like her dear papa !’

Hetty now proceeded to try her skill upon the stained-glass windows, till the nurse came and fetched her in.

As the curate was leaving the church he

met Mrs. Chine in a state of great excitement.

‘Have you heard the dreadful report?’

‘No! What is it?’

‘Mr. Hatter has been beating his wife.’

‘Nonsense!’

‘It is quite true. It happened yesterday. Mrs. Piggott saw him doing it with his walking-stick. First of all he knocked her down; she immediately jumped up and boxed his ears. Then he kicked her, and she spit at him. He at last took up a thick bludgeon and beat her all round the room—you might have heard her screams miles off.’

‘What intolerable rubbish!’

‘It is quite true. Mrs. Hatter is covered with bruises from head to foot. She has not got a square inch of white skin left. I called myself this morning and caught sight of her with a black eye. There is no mistake about it—the wicked wretch! I suppose you will write to the bishop at once, and then he will give you the living instead. Oh! what a happy day! We shall be delivered from the

tyrant at last !' Here Mrs. Chine shed tears.

'Mrs. Chine, when you cease to behave like a maniac I will listen to you. Good-morning !'

Plainton went on to the Vicarage, where he had to leave some papers. He was shown into the dining-room, where he found Hetty amusing herself with catching flies and putting them in the ink-pot. Elijah Humm was also there, engaged in a new capacity. He was sitting at a sewing machine hemming a white garment, and Mrs. Hatter was standing over him superintending the work.

Plainton observed that Mrs. Hatter had a white handkerchief tied over one eye.

'Oh ! good-morning, Mr. Plainton. You see I am an invalid.'

'I hope it is nothing serious.'

'Only a black eye. Hetty wanted to have her donkey in the drawing-room to pull her wagon round the table, and when I refused she threw the glass ink-pot at me, which unfortunately caught me in the left eye, and the

contents spoilt my dress as well as the carpet.'

'How very shocking!'

'It is rather awkward, as I have a good deal of needlework in hand just now. I am afraid the mark will not come out of the carpet quite.'

'What a pity!'

'But the worst of it is, that it keeps Hetty from riding, as I cannot trust any one with her and the donkey but myself. However, I hope to get out to-morrow or next day by continually bathing the bruise. I shall have to ride Neddy myself at first, as he has been so frisky lately.'

Plainton noticed that Hetty was still very busy drowning the flies, and thought that perhaps Mrs. Hatter had not observed it.

'I am afraid,' he began, 'that both the flies and the ink are likely to suffer from the experiments Hetty is now making.'

'Yes, but it keeps her quiet and is perfectly harmless. I see the ink-pot is quite full now. Here, Humm, get Sarah to rinse this out and

put some fresh ink in for Hetty.' Turning to the child she said: 'You can go on catching the flies, darling, and put them under this tumbler till Mr. Humm comes back.'

When the curate went home to luncheon he said to Margaret:

'What do you think? I found Humm at quite a new missionary work this morning.'

'Did you? I hope some good will come of it. What was he doing?'

'He was at work at Mrs. Hatter's sewing machine on some linen garment of hers.'

'What do you mean, Pawley?' asked Margaret, opening her eyes very wide.

'I don't know,' returned he, rubbing his head dubiously. 'It certainly was white, but now I come to think of it, I will not undertake to say it was linen. It might have been samite. It undoubtedly was "mystic, wonderful," and very like something I have occasionally seen you adorned with.'

'How very odd! Mrs. Chubb affirms that Humm is Mrs. Hatter's lady's-maid, and that he goes early to the Vicarage every morning

to dress her hair, as no one else but him could arrange such extraordinary and original devices as her head exhibits.'

'It cannot be true.'

'Well, I should think it was a little invention started by Mrs. Chine in the first instance; but a great many believe it, or pretend to do so.'

Two days after this there was a large garden-party at Mrs. Thornycroft's. The best families for miles round sent contingents. The Hatters had not received an invitation, on account of the feud still existing between the families.

As Plainton and his sister were about to enter Mr. Thornycroft's gate, they heard behind them a great shouting and hallooing. Looking round they saw Neddy approaching at full gallop, with Mrs. Hatter on his back. She was followed by a crowd of labourers and school-children, at the head of which was Mr. Hatter, vainly calling upon the rebellious donkey to stop.

Neddy, seeing an inviting space through the

gate, suddenly turned in and careered madly across the lawn, to the utter bewilderment of the Thornycrofts and their friends.

Mr. Thornycroft was standing talking to two ladies with his back to the entrance, and did not see the animal approach in time enough to get quite out of its way ; he consequently received a blow which sent him headlong against a waiter carrying a tray of glasses, and the pair came down together.

Mrs. Hatter valiantly kept her seat, still flourishing her sunshade, until the beast stopped somewhat too suddenly at a table where refreshments were spread. The fair rider, not being prepared for so sudden a pull-up, lost her balance, and fell with a great crash among the ices and claret-cups.

Plainton ran to her assistance, but she was so entangled with the table-cloth and her own drapery, that it was with the greatest difficulty, and only after the most delicate handling, that he was able to get her on her feet again. As soon as she had shaken herself together, she exclaimed, as she wiped a straw-

berry ice off her face with the skirt of her dress :

‘How tiresome ! Hetty will lose her ride ! Bring the donkey out for me, Mr. Plainton.’

But this was not such an easy matter. Neddy liked the nice fresh lawn, and was in no hurry to move. The Thornycrofts and their guests looked on with a distant and disgusted air. Mrs. Thornycroft affirmed that it was a planned thing of Mrs. Hatter’s in order to maim Mr. Thornycroft for life, and to bring her garden-party into ridicule. Meanwhile Mrs. Hatter and Plainton, with a great deal of coaxing and pushing, got the donkey out between them.

They found Mr. Hatter standing outside quite breathless. It appeared that Mrs. Hatter mounted the animal in order to breathe him before entrusting Hetty to his care. But he had not received more than a couple of prods from the sticks of two of the children than he set off at a furious pace before Mrs. Hatter was properly adjusted.

On cross-questioning the boys Plainton

discovered that one of the sticks was provided with a long-sharp nail, which no doubt Neddy had felt.

The Vicar and his wife led the donkey between them back to the Vicarage.

‘Enoch, you really must sell this incorrigible animal.’

‘Eh — eh,’ — gasped Hatter, ‘I must. There’s poor Mrs. Smethurst, you know, who has had a paralytic stroke, and requires fresh air. It would be just the thing for her basket-carriage. I must see what can be done.’

The Vicar’s resolution to sell Neddy was hastened by an odd incident which occurred on the following Sunday. The donkey had been confined in a small field adjoining the enclosure round the church.

Whether by accident, or through the mischievous design of one of the school-boys, the gate between the two enclosures had been left open. Neddy being, like his master, of an inquisitive disposition, had strayed into the ground belonging to the church.

Mr. Hatter had ascended the pulpit and given out his text, when Neddy thrust his head in at the west door, which always stood wide open in summer on account of the intense closeness of the building. There was no doorkeeper there, the chief verger confining his attention to the fashionable end of the church, in the chancel and south transept quite out of sight, and his assistant being then comfortably seated in a corner in the west gallery, in order to get a nap during the sermon.

Neddy complacently surveyed the backs of the congregation for a few seconds, then slowly ascending the two steps, quietly, and as unobtrusively as is possible to a donkey, began to move up the centre of the nave.

It is not known to this day what it was that specially attracted him. Some have said that it was the quantity of flowers and garden stuff in Mrs. Chine's bonnet; others maintain that he was moved by the Vicar's eloquence, and wished to do public penance for his misdoings during the preceding week.

Be that as it may, Neddy proceeded without let or hindrance as far as the reading-desk, which was immediately under the pulpit. There he halted with his head over the door, calmly contemplating the prayer-book which Plainton had left when he had gone within the chancel, and his body completely blocking up the passage from the pulpit.

A titter went round the church. The Vicar stammered and hesitated in his sermon, but no one would venture to tackle the intruding animal. At length Mr. Manley, the junior churchwarden, walked quietly down to Mr. Thornycroft's pew, in order to take counsel with his brother warden.

Now Mr. Thornycroft was a great stickler for legality and precedent, and as soon as he had been sworn in churchwarden had purchased a copy of the 'Canons' and of 'Brooke's Churchwarden's Guide.' These two books he always brought to church with his prayer-book and hymn-book.

'What is to be done?' whispered Manley.

Thornycroft slowly put on his glasses, and

pulling out his copy of the ‘Canons,’ observed, softly :

‘I don’t think this case is provided for in the “Canons.” It is quite unprecedented. Wait a minute and I’ll look. Oh ! here’s something in the 19th Canon on “Loiterers,” which I should think might apply : “The churchwardens or questmen, and their assistants, shall not suffer any idle persons——” ’

‘But the donkey is not a person,’ objected Manley, under his breath.

‘I think that’s quite open to argument. Undoubtedly, if the donkey is a person I can have him up for brawling.’

‘But he has not opened his mouth yet.’

‘I don’t care what you call it. The 18th Canon settles the matter. It says : “Neither shall they disturb the sermon by walking or talking, or any other way.” I’ll summon the disturber to-morrow.’

‘But you cannot summon the donkey.’

‘No, perhaps not ; I am not quite clear on that. But certainly I can the owner.’

‘That’s the Vicar !’

‘I cannot help that,’ returned Thornycroft, sternly, with a vivid recollection of Neddy’s uninvited appearance at the garden-party. ‘The Vicar has allowed his donkey to come into church and disturb the sermon, and I should not be doing my duty if I did not summon him before myself and Broadbeam. We are not going to have the whole parish priest-ridden by the Vicar’s donkey.’

Mr. Manley felt there was a good deal of force in these remarks, and returned to his pew to think the matter over.

Meanwhile the Vicar had finished his sermon. The congregation had been wondering for the last quarter of an hour how he would get out, so as to join the curate in the chancel. Three ways were open to him. He might climb over the donkey’s back, or creep beneath his belly, or scramble over the pews.

The people waited the solution of the problem with breathless suspense. When the Vicar had descended the stairs and come close up to the donkey, he was heard to whisper in his most persuasive tone :

‘ Eh—eh—come up, Neddy, come up !’

But in vain. Neddy was unmoved by his appeal. Hatter then, in pure desperation, put his hands on the animal’s hind quarters, and after a few seconds’ exciting struggle managed to get room to squeeze himself through.

Unfortunately, as he passed the animal’s head, his hood, which had been much disarranged by the incident, caught on Neddy’s nose, who, not much liking academical honours, tried to rid himself of the encumbrance by putting his foot through it. Hatter made two or three ineffectual tugs to release it, and then, to extricate himself from his ludicrous position, hastily threw it off. It fell on the animal’s neck. Hatter proceeded to the chancel, while Neddy stood patiently where he was, duly invested in the Vicar’s hood.

Several of the congregation in remarking on the matter afterwards, thought the incident a good omen; and said if they could only be sure of getting rid of Hatter they would gladly hail Neddy as his successor, feeling certain that he

would prove far more useful and trustworthy.

When the congregation had been dismissed, the Vicar, the curate, the two churchwardens, and the vergers, proceeded to eject the donkey, and accomplished the feat with very little difficulty, Hatter sending his hood to the Vicarage to get it repaired.

Hatter and Thornycroft had a long altercation on the point of law above mentioned; but on the former undertaking to get rid of the animal, legal proceedings were suspended for the present.

Early on the following morning Mr. Hatter called on Mrs. Smethurst, who had not been out to church for weeks, and knew nothing of Neddy's eccentricities. He told her that he should not think of parting with the animal to any one but her. He felt, however, that her heavy affliction should not be overlooked, and he thought he could not do better than give her the first offer of Neddy—a docile beast, which Hetty could manage like a kitten.

In fact it was because of the animal's pro-

vidential fitness for the purpose that he had hastened to Mrs. Smethurst to suggest this means of recovering her health. The good lady felt the Vicar's kindness very deeply, and although she did not want the animal, thought it would be ungrateful to refuse. She accordingly accepted the donkey on Hatter's terms, which were only two pounds more than he had himself paid. As he afterwards remarked to Mrs. Hatter, the beast was really worth a good deal more, considering the valuable education and high training he had received from Hetty and her mother.



CHAPTER IV.

A VIOLENT LOVER.

It is necessary to give our readers a more particular account of Mr. Melody. He was an Irish gentleman of good birth and ample fortune. But from an early age he had been addicted to the vice of gaming. His winning manners, graceful wit, and exquisite tenor voice made his company much sought after.

For some years he had been one of the Castledown set, and had indulged more and more deeply his love of play. A curious sort of attachment subsisted between him and Fortescue. The latter was a man of strong passions and immovable will, but he was at times gloomy and taciturn. Melody was the

only man who could bring him round to a pleasanter mood. Even Fortescue could not long resist the sparkling gaiety and ready wit of his companion.

Melody had hitherto avoided bringing any of his companions to the Lodge, but on one occasion he invited Fortescue down to a day's fishing. The latter saw Miss Melody for the first time, and was surprised to find her quite different from all the women he had known. Her queenly beauty, her aristocratic bearing, her indifference to admiration, her sweetness of disposition and the evident strength of character which she possessed, captivated him. He conceived for her a strong passion. Accustomed to gratify his every whim without difficulty or delay, he had, with somewhat of precipitancy, pressed his suit.

To his extreme surprise Mona rejected every advance. He was young, had wealth, and was highly connected, and a peerage was possible to him—what more could the girl want? he asked himself.

And was he to blame that he formed so

low an estimate of women ? It was not altogether his fault. He had seen that women of the highest position, considered to be patterns of culture and refinement, were ready to marry the highest bidder without the least regard to the man's antecedents, to his opinions or mode of life. Why should Mona be different from other women ?

Her repulse of him inflamed his passion, and he urged Melody again and again to use more direct influence with his daughter. But the father had a great respect for his daughter's peculiar character, and refrained for a long time from pressing the matter. Latterly Fortescue had come very little to the Lodge, and Mona had hoped that he was at length beginning to understand that his suit could never be successful.

But her lover was only developing a deeply-laid scheme, which he thought would compel her to capitulate. He encouraged Melody in his gambling propensities ; in Vienna, Paris, London, and Brighton, wherever they happened to be staying, Fortescue would tempt

his infatuated companion to indulge his favourite pleasure. Mr. Melody ran through a great portion of his property—he mortgaged the rest to Fortescue on advantageous terms. The latter obtained a complete hold over the fortune and reputation of his associate. As this became more apparent, Fortescue became less reserved in making known his designs, and at last offered to cancel all Melody's pecuniary obligations on condition of his placing Mona in his power.

The proposition, darkly hinted at at first, was at length deliberately avowed. But Melody, wild and dissipated as had been his life, was not yet sunk so low as to receive this offer with equanimity. He rejected it with horror and indignation. Had his strength of will been equal to his anger he would have defied his crafty companion to do his worst. But there were no heroics in Mr. Melody's composition. The estrangement between himself and his companion was but temporary. They soon became more intimate than ever, and Melody indulged in his

favourite pastime still more passionately than before.

It is doubtful if any of the maxims of morality or any of the dictates of natural affection can long withstand the assaults of the relentless demon which possessed the gamester's breast. Horrible as the suggestion of Fortescue seemed at first to him, it was after all the only way out of his difficulty—the only means by which Melody could gratify his passion. Fortescue soon became aware of the struggle going on between the demon and the stifled voice of Melody's better nature, and, exercising extreme caution, only now and again skilfully sounded his companion on the subject which occupied so much of the thoughts of both. The actual proposition was not again openly debated between them, but hints were occasionally dropped on each side, and something like a tacit understanding was at length arrived at.

Fortescue, however, determined to make one more effort to subdue Mona by argument before proceeding to extremities.

One morning, somewhat early for a visitor, Mr. Fortescue was announced at Dargal Lodge. Being an old friend of Mr. Melody's he was shown at once into the drawing-room, where he found Mona alone. She turned very pale on seeing him, and walked towards the door :

‘ I will tell mamma——’ she began.

‘ Wait one moment, Miss Melody. I shall not detain you long. I have come to speak to you.’

‘ Oh ! pray don't——’ said she, involuntarily shuddering.

A black cloud passed over the face of her visitor.

‘ Well, I do not know why I should be treated like this. I have shown you how much I love you. For your sake I have befriended your father——’

‘ I would you had never known him.’

‘ Never known him ! Where would he have been if I had not been his friend ? Whenever he wanted money he has come to me for it, and has had it without stint. And he may

have as much more as he will, if you choose, but if you——'

'Pray, Mr. Fortescue, do not persecute me like this. It is impossible for me to love you. I am grateful to you for asking me, indeed I am ; but it cannot be.'

'You shall consent,' said the passionate man, standing up ; 'if not because you love me, it shall be because you fear me.'

Mona made a gesture of surprise.

'At any moment I can ruin your family. It is in your power to prevent it.'

'This is ungentlemanly. It is most cruel.'

'The remedy lies with yourself.'

'I do not know to what you refer,' said Mona, with a vague fear at her heart ; 'and if it were as you say, that you can ruin my family, I could not accept your terms to prevent it. I prefer poverty and disgrace in the eyes of the world.'

'Think again. You know not the risk you are running. Your father's name will become a synonym for dishonour, and you will be scorned and contemned.'

‘ Oh ! Mr. Fortescue, you cannot be a man, to talk like this ! What harm have I done you ; what wrong has papa done you, that you should show such vindictive hatred ? ’

Mona was much agitated. She did not doubt that her father was in some way dependent on the consideration and mercy of Fortescue. Was it possible to conciliate this man ? Could he be reasoned into a more generous mood ? She feared not. She could gather no hope from his face. He had often approached her as a lover, with more or less respect and tenderness, but he had never before dared to be so overbearing and threatening.

Her agitation and helplessness gave him exquisite pleasure. He loved her with a strong passion ; yet there was mingled with it a current of fierce hate, that she should thus move and thwart him. He watched the changes in her face and eye as she tried to see a way out of her extreme distress. He gloated over every indication of pain or fear.

‘ I am willing to treat you with the utmost tenderness, if you will allow me. You know the possibilities of my position. But I will not be thwarted. I will give you a month to think it over, or longer, if you wish. Consider whether you will save your father——’

But Mona had now recovered her usual courage, and interrupted him with :

‘ I need no time for that, Mr. Fortescue. I would not save him on the terms you offer.’ Her voice trembled slightly, but the eye was fearless, and the mouth firm. ‘ Poverty and ruin in the eyes of the world would be preferable.’

Her lover regarded her with mingled rage and admiration.

Suddenly changing his tone, and keenly searching her face, he asked :

‘ Mona, tell me, and I will say no more—is there some one else you love ?’

Mona was silent. He thought he had hit on the true cause of the rejection of his

‘I see, I am right in my conjecture,’ he continued.

‘You have no right to ask such a question.’

‘Ah! I thought it was so,’ he returned, with bitterness. ‘And I think I know who it is. I will dog him to his grave,’ he exclaimed fiercely. ‘I will make his life a misery to him!’

‘Mr. Fortescue, this is really monstrous. No one has proposed to me but yourself.’

‘Very likely. But you are expecting some one else will. I quite understand a woman’s way of speaking in a double sense.’

‘No, you are wrong. I do not suspect any one of entertaining such an intention. I know no one in the world who desires to marry me but yourself,’ said Mona, emphatically.

‘Not even the curate,’ he rejoined contemptuously.

‘If you mean Mr. Plainton,’ responded Mona, calmly, ‘I feel quite certain that he has neither the intention nor the desire.’

‘ You never can be sure of a parson. They are a slippery lot.’

‘ Mr. Fortescue,’ said she, indignantly ; ‘ I will not hear my friends insulted. And if you do not move away from the door, I must ring the bell.’

‘ You can go,’ he replied, opening the door, and bowing. ‘ But I have not done yet. You will repent of your obstinacy.’ With these words he left the house.

Mona hastened to her room to think over the scene in quiet. He had never before behaved so brutally ; what did it mean ? She had long suspected that he had obtained some secret hold over her father, and now he had not scrupled to speak of it. She felt it would be useless to tell her mother what had happened.

Mrs. Melody had lived on compromises. She was fond of her daughter, but she was also fond of her own ease and comfort. She had a horror of difficulties, and would do almost anything to avoid unpleasantnesses. Had a burglar broken into her house, she

would have been quite willing to pay him black-mail to go away, rather than be at the trouble of imprisoning him, even if he were delivered up bound into her hands.

There was very little in common between mother and daughter. Mrs. Melody thought her daughter peculiar, but never realised the fact that they moved in different spheres, though living under the same roof. Had Mona talked to her mother of her spiritual struggles and difficulties, the good woman would have thought her demented, and probably would have consulted Dr. Jolly on her daughter's mental hallucinations. With regard to Fortescue, Mrs. Melody knew Mona disliked him, so did she herself. But then he was so very persistent, that it was really painful to keep on resisting him. For the sake of peace she would be rather inclined to consent to his wishes.

A week after this memorable interview, Miss Melody received a very respectful note from Mr. Fortescue, in which he humbly apologised for his behaviour at his last inter-

view with her. He begged that it might be forgiven and forgotten, and that they might meet as heretofore on friendly terms. Mona was very pleased to get this letter ; for did it not show that the man was not wholly destitute of right feeling ? and might he not be brought at last to act generously towards her father, should his boast be true that Mr. Melody was in his power ? She wrote a polite and even friendly acceptance of this apology, but avoided saying anything as to their future intercourse.

Some little time after this incident Mr. Melody spent a whole day at the Lodge. He took Mona out on the water, he let her dream beneath the willows, he plucked her a nosegay of wild flowers, and in the evening sang some of his favourite songs. She was enchanted. She began to think that happy days were yet in store for them, and that possibly her father would yet shake off his evil companions and give up his ‘pleasant vices.’

On the following morning Mr. Melody had

to go to Brighton. He called Mona into the garden before he went, and after walking once or twice round the grounds began to speak of Mr. Fortescue.

Poor Mona's face instantly lost all its newly-acquired brightness and happiness.

'Oh! papa, do not let us speak about him! I cannot endure it.'

'But do you not think that in time you could get over this unaccountable aversion to a man so well worthy to be your husband?'

'No, never!'

'Perhaps, Mona, you have seen some one else you like better?'

Mona was silent.

'Tell me if it is so.'

'My heart is quite free, papa. But I cannot marry a man I do not love!'

'Fortescue was under the impression that he had a rival. In fact, he thought you had some preference for the curate.'

'It is very ungenerous to mention Mr. Plainton's name,' returned Mona, quietly and firmly. 'Mr. Plainton has shown us nothing

but courtesy and kindness, and would hardly like, I think, that his acts should be thus misinterpreted.'

'I did not believe it for a moment,' said Mr. Melody, greatly relieved. 'As Mr. Plainton has no private means, it was not at all likely. But, Mona, unless you have some stronger objection to Mr. Fortescue than I know of, I think it right to tell you that I am under the deepest obligations to him.'

'Pray do not urge me, papa. Setting aside all other considerations, I could not marry a man destitute of religion. I should feel it a degradation and a dishonour!'

'Wherever did you pick up these Quixotic notions? You never got them from me.'

'No, papa, I did not,' said Mona, sadly.

'This comes of shutting yourself up and dreaming all day. You cannot go through the world with these fantastic and impractical notions!'

'I hope to do so.'

'Impossible! Wild and fanciful in the extreme!'

‘ I am sorry you think so.’

‘ Do you know that if you refuse Fortescue I shall be ruined ?’

‘ Oh ! papa, don’t say so !’

‘ It is a fact, nevertheless. I am completely in his power, and if he wills it we are beggars to-morrow !’

Mona was hardly prepared for so emphatic a confirmation of Fortescue’s boast. She sat down under the lindens, and looked helplessly at her father, while he proceeded at some length to tell her the state of his property.

Mona saw the enemy closing in upon her on every side. There appeared to be no escape. When Mr. Melody had finished his recital there was silence for a time. He had seen the change in his daughter’s face, and trusted that she would at last submit.

‘ Well, Mona, what do you say ? Will you save me and yourself ?’

‘ No ! papa, I cannot at such a price. It would be a great sin. Poverty, beggary, disease, and death, are all preferable to a dishonoured conscience !’

Mr. Melody looked at her with astonishment.

‘And you are prepared to carry your absurd sentimentality to these lengths?’

‘Yes, papa, if need be. God will not desert His own.’

‘This is madness and fanaticism!’ After a pause, he added, ‘I really do not know what is to be done.’

‘I will do anything I can to avert the blow except what you ask!’

‘There is nothing else will do it.’

‘Let us trust in God!’

Mr. Melody laughed bitterly, but said nothing. Soon after he left the house.

Poor Mona was greatly distressed. She had been gently nurtured, and had no desire unnecessarily to encounter the hardships of poverty. But what was she to do? She could not marry Fortescue. Her soul revolted at the thought of it.

It was now sufficiently clear that her father was helplessly bound to her lover. Oh! if she could only release him, and break the bond

which held him so tightly. Even if she could, she knew that her father would not be safe long. His excessive weakness of will and principle would lead him at any time into vice, and entangle him in the meshes of some crime which, in his better moments, he would regard with abhorrence.

Everything looked very dark around her ; she did not know which way to turn. How she longed to pour out all her perplexities into the sympathising ear of Plainton. But, no ; she could not do that. He must not be brought within the reach of designing and unscrupulous men, for she felt that there was scarcely anything at which Fortescue would pause, if he were convinced that the curate stood in his way.

That night, as she prepared to lie down, she sang softly to herself :

‘ Lead, kindly Light, amid the encircling gloom,
 Lead Thou me on !
The night is dark, and I am far from home—
 Lead Thou me on !
Keep Thou my feet ; I do not ask to see
The distant scene,—one step enough for me.’

She had heard Plainton quote that same verse in an impassioned sermon, in which he seemed to refer, perhaps unconsciously, to some dark and painful experience of his own.



CHAPTER V.

THE RESCUE.

PLAINTON frequently walked in the neighbourhood of Dargal Lodge without calling. He liked to believe, from an inspection of the outer walls, that all was going on satisfactorily and quietly within. Occasionally moved by some strong and unaccountable impulse, he would call, and finding Mona calm and peaceful in mind, would quickly depart again.

On one such evening he had made his usual round of the estate. Everything seemed preternaturally still. He thought that even the birds which frequented the trees of the Lodge were on this evening unusually silent. Not a breath of air was moving.

As he was entering the gate he heard the faint cheep of a bird at his feet, and looking down saw in the grass on one side a wounded thrush, which apparently had received a stray shot from a gun. He took it up and carried it in his hand, intending to consign it to the tender care of Miss Melody. He entered and stood in front of the house. There was no movement within, nothing to mark the presence of any living being.

He passed round the side of the house and came on to the lawn. He discerned Miss Melody at the further end, dressed in white, seated in her favourite attitude beneath the linden, as if listening for something a long way off, and gazing before her into vacancy. As he approached he saw that she was dressed for dinner. She wore her gold cross, and had a white camellia in her glossy hair.

When Plainton spoke, she started with joyful surprise, and said :

‘How strange that you should have come in just now !’

‘ Is it ? I thought, as I was near, I would see if you were all quite well.’

‘ Oh ! pray sit down. What is that in your hand ?’

‘ A poor wounded bird I picked up at your gate. Can anything be done for it ?’

Miss Melody took it in her hand and stroked it gently, but the wounded songster was too far gone to recover. The tears came into her eyes as she said :

‘ Poor bird ! a short life and a sharp death ; it shall be buried by my myrtle ;’ and she covered it over in the shrubbery.

‘ Mamma and Mrs. Eugénie have gone with Arthur to Brighton. They went by arrangement this afternoon to see that everything was ready, and papa is to take me to-morrow.’

‘ Rather a sudden movement, is it not ?’

‘ Very. It was only settled yesterday. But the odd thing is that after they had left, this telegram came.’

She handed to Plainton a telegram containing the following brief message :

‘ Spring Gardens.

‘ Fortescue is coming down with me to dinner at eight. Will stay all night. Parker will wait.’

‘ Who is Fortescue ?’ asked Plainton, anxiously.

Miss Melody hesitated a few seconds, and then replied quietly :

‘ Oh ! I forgot, you have never met him. He is papa’s great friend, and enormously rich, I believe. He sometimes comes down when papa is in town. But he is not a pleasant man, although he is very fond of papa.’

‘ It seems a strange arrangement. Is there no other lady to be present to support you ?’

‘ No. It does not matter so much, as papa himself has arranged it, and will be here. Fortescue is a very old friend. It appears to be quite an accident,’ said Miss Melody, evidently trying to make the best of an unpleasant position.

Plainton’s mind reverted to the conversation, parts of which he had overheard by the

summer-house, and a strong foreboding of evil took possession of him. He felt, however, that he had no right to make any further remarks upon the matter, unless Miss Melody herself led the way to it. But he determined he would watch the house, if need be, the whole night long.

He could not shake off the alarm her communication had caused ; and after a brief conversation rose to go. Now that he was going, Miss Melody's manner became less constrained, and she said, with half a sob, as he shook hands :

‘ I wish you could stay !’

‘ So do I,’ returned he, thoughtfully ; ‘ but I cannot invite myself to another man's table. You know I have never yet met your papa.’

‘ I know. He has been so busy, and has come down so late generally, that you have always missed him. When you have been here to dinner it has always happened that he has been away. Come in after dinner to-night.’

‘ I can do that, and will.’

‘ Thanks,’ said she, recovering herself.

Plainton hastened home, and told his sister not to wait up, in case he should be detained late that night. Margaret looked up inquiringly, but said nothing.

At a quarter past nine he rang the bell at Dargal Lodge. Parker came to the door, and looked much astonished.

‘ Mrs. Melody is away, sir, and Mr. Melody has a friend to dinner.’

‘ I know,’ said Plainton, walking into the hall. ‘ You can tell Miss Melody that I am here.’

After a little delay the man returned and said :

‘ Will you walk into the drawing-room, sir?’

The curate knew he was an unwelcome visitor so far as the men were concerned, but the thought of the utter helplessness of Miss Melody overpowered every other consideration. Mona greeted him cordially, and introducing him to the gentlemen, who had followed her from the dining-room, said :

‘It is very good of you to come. I told papa I expected you.’

The two gentlemen received him with studied coolness. A supercilious smile sat on the face of Mr. Melody, who seemed as if he had been drinking somewhat too freely, while a thinly-disguised scowl betrayed the anger and mortification of his companion.

Mona played a few pieces, but did not attempt to sing. Plainton sang to make out the time, and to relieve Miss Melody as much as he could.

At length the usual hour of departure came. What should he do? He must go; and after lingering as long as he could without exciting suspicion, rose to depart.

Miss Melody turned deadly pale, and Plainton felt her cold hand tremble in his own.

‘Good-night!’ she said, as a shadow of pain passed over her face.

But Plainton’s feelings were by this time wrought up to a pitch of excitement, and when he said ‘good-night,’ he added, in a quick undertone :

‘I shall not go far.’ He was rewarded with a grateful look.

Parker let him out and bolted the hall-door behind him. Plainton went out of the gate and walked along by the wall. He came opposite to the back of the house, and after a while saw lights moving in the upper rooms. It must now be quite half-past ten. There was only a light in one bedroom, which he conjectured was Mr. Melody’s. Surely he would not leave his daughter alone with Fortescue ! Then the conversation in the summer-house rang again in Plainton’s ears.

He walked back to the gate, there was no light in the front. Again he hurried to his former station. Still there was only a light in the principal bedroom. The perspiration poured off his forehead, as he asked himself what he should do. He waited and listened. He could hear nothing. Presently the church clock chimed three-quarters past ten. The night was very still. Was that a scream he heard ? Impossible. It must be due to his excited imagination.

At that moment it occurred to him to go on to the lawn and try if he could look in at the drawing-room window. 'What a pity I did not think of it before !' he said to himself. He passed through the gate, and went to the back of the house quite softly on the turf.

The drawing-room shutters had been put over but not fastened ; the leaf of one side had started back a few inches, and the light was streaming through. He crept quietly up and looked in. The scene he witnessed sent the blood fiercely whirling through his veins.

Miss Melody was lying on the couch apparently senseless, and the rich treasure of her unbound hair had rolled over it and was straggling on the floor. Fortescue was leaning over her with a phial in his hand, every line of his face swollen with passion.

Plainton gave but one glance and tried to throw up the window. Luckily it was not bolted. If it had been he would have kicked it in ; he felt strong enough for anything. Fortescue started as he heard the casement, and turned round. Plainton advanced towards

him. His enemy's face became livid with hate and disappointed lust, and swearing a horrid oath he threw himself upon the unwelcome intruder.

Both at school and at college Plainton had been accustomed to athletic exercises, and was considered an excellent wrestler. Something like joy animated his heart as he closed with Fortescue, for he felt he was grasping evil in an incarnate form. It was not the spiritual struggle of the ascetic in his cell, to which he had been so long inured ; this was a tangible evil to contend with—one he could feel with his hands and see with his eyes.

The two men, who were very evenly matched in strength and weight, swayed backwards and forwards for a second or two, when Fortescue stumbled over a small table on which stood a large china vase. The table fell with a loud crash and they on it, Fortescue falling beneath, and striking his head and shoulder with such force against the leg as to break it off short. They immediately sprang to their feet again, Plainton picking up, as he rose, the broken leg of the table.

At that moment another actor appeared on the scene, and the combatants paused. Through the open window came a female figure closely muffled up, which, without appearing to notice the men, immediately approached the couch where Mona still lay in unconsciousness. Plainton recognised his sister. Margaret, suspecting mischief was afoot from her brother's manner, had followed and watched him, creeping up by the shrubbery when he passed to the back of the house.

Fortescue looked at her in undisguised amazement, and, finding himself finally baffled, leaned against the mantelpiece with an affected air of indifference.

‘I am afraid Miss Melody is very unwell,’ said Margaret at length, when she found that Mona did not respond to her efforts to restore her.

‘Yes,’ exclaimed Plainton, ‘and is likely to be, in this house of horror and mystery.’

Fortescue, who had now recovered his coolness, looking at the curate with a contemptuous smile, said :

‘Go on, parson, preach away. You have a congregation who can appreciate a pious discourse.’

‘The present congregation, like most others, is mixed; but I know how to adapt my teaching to the individual wants of my hearers,’ responded Plainton, with an ominous swing of the table leg.

Miss Melody now began to show signs of returning consciousness, but her nerves had evidently received a great shock. Just then Parker entered the room and spoke a few words to Fortescue, who immediately withdrew, and shortly afterwards Plainton heard the hall-door close after him.

Margaret at length prepared to go.

‘Oh! no!’ exclaimed Mona, ‘take me with you. I will not stay here.’

‘I do not think it would be advisable for you to leave the house at this hour,’ said Margaret, ‘it might excite public attention; and besides, you are not in a fit condition.’

‘I will not stay! I will not stay!’ and putting her hands to her face she trembled

violently, as if endeavouring in vain to shut out some horrid vision.

Plainton and Margaret held a brief consultation together, the result of which was that Miss Plainton offered to remain with Mona until the morning, an offer which was gladly accepted, and which seemed to restore her calmness.

The curate, feeling that they were quite safe now, departed. Yet he walked up and down in front of the house for an hour, to be quite sure that Fortescue would not return, though it was hardly likely that he would be so foolish after what had occurred.

Plainton was up early the next morning, and at eight o'clock Margaret appeared with Mona.

'We thought you would like to know how we slept, so we have come to breakfast to tell you,' said Margaret, cheerfully.

'I am very glad you have come so early. And how did you sleep?'

'Oh! pretty well, all things considered.'

Miss Melody looked very pale, but was

quite calm. Plainton was in good spirits, and the three sat down to a pleasant meal.

The curate was pleased to see how quickly Miss Melody regained her spirits. She seemed very happy when they insisted upon keeping her all day, and by luncheon-time she had, to all appearance, very fairly recovered from the terrible shock she had sustained.

In the afternoon Mrs. Melody, who had been summoned back by telegram, called at the Plaintons'. Nothing was said about Fortescue. Mrs. Melody only remarked that she was sorry Mona had been so unwell. In the evening Plainton and his sister took their guest home, and stayed with her till quite late. She had quite regained her usual stately bearing and calm equanimity of manner when they took their leave.



CHAPTER VI.

PARISH GOSSIP.

WHEN the Vicar had returned from his month's fishing, he was asked by one or two of the bolder members of his congregation when the curate was going away; and to rid himself of his tormentors he at length offered Plainton two Sundays away.

On the Saturday before he started, Elijah Humm brought a box of calomel pills from the Vicar, with the following note:

‘The Vicarage,
‘Saturday.

‘MY DEAR PLAINTON,

‘Humm will bring you a small box of calomel pills, which I think will prove useful

while you are away. If you were to take two on each Saturday night you would be able to enjoy a quiet day on Sunday, as you will not wish to be moving on that day.

‘I must particularly request that you undertake no duty for any one during your absence from us. You had better wear a black tie, otherwise, wherever you go, the resident incumbent—most likely an idle man—will be sure to pounce down upon you, and thus my object in giving a holiday will be defeated.

‘Perhaps you can take with you the proof-sheets of my new book, and index it at your leisure. You will find it a pleasing and gentle pastime after the fatigue of walking and the monotony of gazing at landscape scenery.

‘Write to me every evening, that I may know where to find you in case it should be necessary to telegraph for you. My chest is very troublesome just now, but I am most anxious that you should not be over-worked.

‘ May your devoted labours receive hereafter their reward ! Amen.

‘ Ever yours,

‘ ENOCH HATTER.’

‘ Ah ! I see,’ said Margaret, ‘ why he grinds down your salary so much of late.’

‘ Why ?’

‘ Because he wishes you to have all your reward hereafter !’

Mr. Macdonald, one of the members of the congregation, gave Plainton an invitation to Scotland, which he gladly accepted. The two of them went through the ‘ Trossachs,’ and the jaded curate was strengthened and enlivened by the noble scenery which met his gaze on every side.

His hospitable companion knew every foot of his native land, and Plainton found him an interesting and amusing fellow-traveller. This trip led to a closer intimacy between them, and Plainton occasionally spent a pleasant hour at his house. One afternoon, soon after his return from Scotland, he found Mrs.

Macdonald in great perplexity. She soon revealed the cause of it.

‘Mr. Plainton, David and I want to ask of you a great favour.’

‘Pray ask, if it is anything I can do.’

‘We have been married now three years, and David thinks we ought to get rid of that ornament under the glass case, which once stood on our wedding-cake. He says it looks stupid to have it in the drawing-room any longer.’

‘Well, I think that is a matter entirely for your own judgment.’

‘We don’t like to break it up or burn it and we don’t like to give it away, as we do not know what would become of it. So we agreed to ask your advice.’

Plainton was in the greatest difficulty as to how this momentous question should be answered. Since he had been in the ministry he had been consulted by men and women of all ages, on matters affecting both their temporal and spiritual interests, but never before had he been asked as to what ought to be

done with the centre-piece of a wedding breakfast-table. It was clearly no light matter to the Macdonalds, and the curate, the more he thought of the matter, was the more embarrassed.

‘I feel that it is very difficult to advise you,’ he began; ‘if I were to say you had better burn it, it is not improbable that when it had been consumed you would want it back again, and for the rest of your days you would remember me in connection with the cremation of the distinguishing ornament of your wedding breakfast. Certainly, to give it away to some poor person about to be married might be a benevolent act, but I fear it would be a sort of white elephant to them, and perhaps embarrass them for the rest of their lives.’

‘That is just what David said.’

‘I believe these things usually find their way into the lumber-room. By-the-bye, I remember taking charge of a parish once, where the vicar was non-resident through ill-health. He had buried three wives, and at

the time I speak of was enjoying the society of his fourth.

‘At the top of the vicarage was an old lumber-room. I made it my study, as it was far away from household noises. One day on opening an old cupboard I was appalled by beholding straight before me four gigantic wedding trophies. On looking more closely at them I found each was labelled with the maiden name of each of the vicar’s wives, and with the date on which she changed it. On three of the labels was also written the date of the lady deceased.’

‘Oh, Mr. Plainton!’ exclaimed Mrs. Macdonald, in affright, ‘I will have the ornament burnt; it shall never stand with that of another—never!’

‘My dear lady,’ said the curate, who began to think that he had told a somewhat foolish story, ‘I am sure it does not follow in the least that if you preserve it, another will necessarily be added to it.’

‘Oh! but now I shall always be imagining

every time I feel unwell that another is coming.'

'But you are young and strong and healthy,' said Plainton, most anxious to remove the unpleasant impression his anecdote had produced; 'and it is almost impossible that you should depart this life before your husband. In fact, it is much more likely ——'

'Oh! don't say that you think I shall be left a widow.'

'No, no, no!' hastily explained Plainton, who was growing very hot, and heartily wished himself a long way off before getting into such a terrible dilemma. 'You are *both* young and healthy and strong, and I feel quite certain that if you ever die you will both go at the same minute, on the same day, at a very advanced age.'

He soon after left, and the problem submitted to him remained unsolved. He took care never to refer to it again, and as the Macdonalds were unable to solve it them-

selves, the ornament still retains its old position.

It was but a short time after his return from his brief holiday that he heard that Ethel and Maud Templeton were about to go to school. He went to see them about it. The two children met him in the meadow of the Manor House.

‘So it is settled that you go to school, Ethel?’

‘Yes, Mr. Plainton.’

‘When do you go?’

‘Next Tuesday; and I do not know what I shall do without you.’

‘Very well indeed, I should think, as you will have no one to plague you.’

‘How naughty of you! Mamma says you are to write to me, please, Mr. Plainton.’

‘Oh no, that would be too shocking. No letters allowed at school except from your mother.’

‘But you are to write, please, Mr. Plainton; and mamma says that your letters are not to be opened before I have them.’

Plainton went in and saw Mrs. Templeton, and heard all about the school at Overshot. As he was coming away Mrs. Templeton said :

‘You will write to Ethel. She quite expects it.’

‘Certainly, if you wish it. I shall have great pleasure in doing so.’

‘I have told Miss Crampton, the head mistress, that your letters are not to be opened.’

‘That is not necessary, surely.’

‘But I have promised Ethel.’

‘Oh, very well,’ said Plainton, laughing.

Mr. Hatter’s great work, ‘Pre Zamzummic Explorations,’ appeared late in the autumn. It made a prodigious sensation. The *Times* devoted four columns and a half to a review of it, which consisted chiefly of extracts and encomiums. The *Scrutator* followed suit.

Mr. Graham, the ex-prime minister, wrote an extremely civil post-card to Mr. Hatter on the subject of the book, which so completely turned the Vicar’s head that he was

obliged to bring it to church to show his curate.

He confidently expected that before the year was out he would be offered a deanery, or at least a good canonry. But in the course of a few weeks a short notice appeared in a literary review remarkable for its accuracy and the ability with which it was conducted. This article took quite a different view of the book. It was known to be penned by Professor Cracker Brown, the renowned philologist. He found fault with some of Mr. Hatter's secondary derivations, and taking fifty at random out of the work, showed that each was hopelessly wrong.

Other well-qualified critics took the matter up, and it was soon seen that the author's previous reading by no means qualified him for the ambitious task he had undertaken. A work which one or two men diffidently approached after twenty or thirty years' diligent study, he had pretended to accomplish after a training of as many weeks.

The part of his book, however, which was

most successful, and was spoken of even by severe critics without condemnation, was that compiled by Hetty, with the assistance of her little wagon. This was found too hard a nut to crack. No one could dispute that the inscriptions were accurately copied, seeing that the originals were destroyed, and no one was able to make anything of them. Those who had been inclined to think lightly of Mr. Hatter's book, owing to its stupendous philological errors, thought it valuable as a repository of priceless inscriptions, the originals of which were for ever lost; and Mr. Hatter found that had Hetty compiled the whole instead of a small portion of the book, his own fame would have been considerably heightened, and the canonry perhaps secured.

The Vicar arranged to spend the winter in Italy. The Sunday before he started he invited Plainton to luncheon. It was a fine, dry day, and when they had finished their meal Mr. Hatter asked his curate to walk into the garden, as he wished to speak to him.

‘Before I go away—eh—eh—I wish particularly to caution you about the Templetons. I believe you are rather intimate with them.’

‘I have seen a good deal of the children.’

‘Exactly. You are not aware, I suppose——’ here he whispered a few words in Plainton’s ear. He was somewhat astonished at the effect they produced. The curate stopped and faced him, and then said loudly and emphatically,

‘It is a wicked and scandalous untruth.’

‘Hush! Dr. Jolly will hear you, and we shall have it all over the parish.’

‘I say it is a monstrous and infamous fabrication.’

‘I hope it may be so. It is of no use to make a noise about it. It is a common enough case.’

‘But——’

‘It is much the same with many others in the parish in their position.’

‘But I say——’

‘You had better speak in a lower voice.’

‘It is a most cruel assertion.’

‘There are very good grounds for believing it.’

‘I don’t believe a word of it.’

‘That does not make it less true. I tell you simply that you may be on your guard.’

‘Monstrous !’

‘I wish you would not speak so loudly. No one knows anything about them, and no one visits them. They scarcely ever come to church.’

‘The children do.’

‘But not the old people.’

‘Well, that is unfortunately the case with many others in Pollington besides them.’

‘Their own relations do not visit them.’

‘Yes, they do, for I have met them there.’

‘Only *her* relations.’

‘His too.’

‘Not the female side.’

‘Yes, both.’

‘Well, you can easily settle the matter by seeing them about it.’

‘May I mention your name ?’

‘Oh no ! I have no authority but rumour.’

‘This is a most cruel assertion, and I am not allowed to refute it in the only way in which it is possible to do it.’

‘You can do what you like if you leave my name out of it. This is a private communication.’

‘But I am not aware that the law allows any one to plead privilege to cover an absolutely false and scandalous statement.’

‘If you choose to act as public prosecutor for all the scandals floated in Pollington you will be well occupied, and will require half a dozen assistants at least.’

‘Pollington is, I think, without exception, the most awfully wicked, abominable, gossiping, tale-bearing place I was ever in. It is really dreadful!’

‘Much the same as other places. You are expending a great deal of energy to no purpose. By-and-by you will learn to take things as they are a little more quietly.’

‘I hope I may never get reconciled to scandal, calumny, and falsehood.’

‘Eh—eh—it is almost time for the afternoon service, I think.’

An opportunity occurred to the curate a long while afterwards of proving satisfactorily that the rumour mentioned by the Vicar was a baseless fabrication.

Later on in the same day Hatter remarked to his wife :

‘Plainton is very hot about the Templetons. I should not be at all surprised if he proposed to one of them.’

‘That would be awkward for us, as we have no hold over any of them.’

‘I have been thinking that we had better see whether we cannot entangle him with Miss Piggott—the Piggott is a good creature, and has now taught Hetty for two years for nothing, merely to enjoy the privilege of sitting in our drawing-room, and of being reckoned amongst our friends. Through her we might bind Plainton hand and foot, as she will swear by anything we say or do.’

‘It is a capital idea, but too good ever to come true.’

‘I don’t know about that. Plainton’s poverty is his weak side, and if we attack him in that direction, using extreme caution and discretion, he must eventually succumb.’

‘It would be an excellent arrangement.’

‘It would, and would really be doing him a good service. For it would separate him from his infernal sister’—here he glanced a look which quite suited the peculiar adjective he had used in speaking of Margaret—‘who has far too much influence over him, and it would be increasing his income. He is wretchedly poor, whilst Piggott has two houses of her own, and her brother being the village butcher, would no doubt, in consideration of the increased custom the alliance would bring, act leniently towards them in the matter of chops and steaks.’

‘Yes, but it is to be hoped that John Piggott’s gratitude would not stop there, if you are fortunate enough to bring the match about.’

‘I have thought of that. Taking everything into consideration, I do not think it

would be too much to expect him to take off quite a halfpenny per pound from all meat sent to the Vicarage.'

'He ought to do that at least, and to throw in an occasional kidney for breakfast for nothing.'

'Well, I must see what can be done. Meanwhile we must throw the pair together as much as possible.'

This he did by sending written messages to the curate through the lady in question, and to the latter through the former.

But he found it impossible to mature his plan during his absence from the parish. There was absolutely nothing upon which he could found a charge of Plainton's having trifled with the affections of an innocent and confiding girl, especially as Miss Piggott had turned forty ; and he was obliged to leave the matter alone until his return.



CHAPTER VII.

PARISH DIFFICULTIES.

ONCE more Plainton found himself in charge of the parish. He more and more realised the difficulty of his position. He was as responsible for the well-being of the people as if he were vicar, and yet he was wholly destitute of a vicar's power and prestige. Many people will do a great deal for the chief who will not move a foot for his subordinate. The vicar is a fixture, but the curate is here to day and, perhaps, gone to-morrow.

Hatter's method of governing Pollington from Italy was characteristic. He received every week full accounts of parish business from Plainton, voluminous reports of parish

scandal from Mrs. Chine, abstracts of the curate's sermons from Miss Piggott, and a diary of his meals, visits, and other doings both from Elijah Humm and Mrs. Chine.

When the winter evenings came round, the Penny Readings began. Amongst other things to interest and amuse his people, Plainton, with immense labour, got up a concert on behalf of the poor, in a parish where he had formerly been curate, who were in a very destitute condition owing to the continued depression of trade.

He was well seconded in this good work by the musical part of the congregation, especially the Langleys and the Templetons. The tickets sold well, and when the momentous night arrived a goodly company assembled. Mrs. Chine appeared in gorgeous array, wearing in Plainton's honour, as she informed him, the orange wreath which had adorned her fair brow on her last bridal morn.

Some of the smaller tradesmen of the place, however, grumbled not a little at this display of zeal by the curate for people outside his own parish.

‘We have enough poor of our own,’ said Gammy, a small linendraper near the Green, who lived on his wife’s earnings for the most part, whilst he devoted his own energies to breeding rabbits, ‘and I do not see what the curate wants to send good money out of the parish for.’

To Plainton’s utter astonishment the complaint was actually repeated by certain people living in handsome villas, who seldom came to church and subscribed but little to any of the parish institutions ; and he felt it his duty at last to preach a sermon on charity, in which he enlarged on the theme that charity, although it may properly begin at home, does not stay there. He pointed out that as a rule those who did most at home, were also those whose sympathies reached farthest, and who interested themselves most deeply in the wants of humanity at large. The niggardly were not only selfish themselves, but grumbled at others for being liberal.

Ethel and Maud came back from school a few days before Christmas. They were look-

ing remarkably well. For the first time the thought came into Plainton's head that in another year or so Ethel would be entering into womanhood, though she looked younger than her years, which were nearly sixteen, and their delightful intercourse would have to cease, or at least be much more reserved.

The thought saddened him till he saw Ethel again, when her perfectly childlike appearance and demeanour, her self-unconsciousness and ingenuousness, gave him the consolation that at any rate at present there was no sign of approaching womanhood.

As this chapter is devoted to parish difficulties, we will proceed to give an account of one or two incidents as specimens of the problems which exercised the patience of the curate during Hatter's absence.

First, as to the memorable conflict over the organ curtains. The parish being very quiet at this time, it would seem as if the demon of mischief envied the peace of mind the curate enjoyed, notwithstanding his heavy and unceasing labour. Old Mr. Broadbeam sud-

denly took a great dislike to the curtains which covered the front of the organ and hid the player from the gaze of the congregation. Mr. Broadbeam had the faculty of getting Thornycroft to agree to any scheme he proposed, and this faculty he exercised with invariable success up to the time that he himself was elected chairman of the Local Board in place of Thornycroft, and chosen also to be his successor as churchwarden. Then his influence ceased, and the two bosom friends were for the future not even on speaking terms. At the time, however, of which we are recording the history, Broadbeam was in the zenith of his power as Thornycroft's oracle, and with no great difficulty he persuaded the churchwarden that the curtains were a nuisance and ought to come down, especially as they only served as a screen for young Bracket, the organist, to peep through at the girls who sat in the pews near.

Accordingly Mr. Thornycroft told Bracket to remove them by the following Sunday. Bracket was aghast. The organ stood in the

nave, and if the curtains were removed, he would be a conspicuous object to the congregation and his every movement observed. It would, he remarked, be especially unpleasant in summer when he always played in his shirt sleeves. The churchwarden was inexorable : the curtains must come down. Bracket, however, did not remove them. And on the following Sunday when Mr. Thornycroft came into church at five minutes to eleven, he saw to his amazement that his instructions had not been obeyed.

He immediately marched up the church and taking hold of the curtains began to sweep them off the brass rod which held them. But Bracket had been expecting this ; therefore, as soon as the churchwarden put his hand on the curtains Bracket held them fast on the other side. Mr. Thornycroft, finding himself thwarted in the eyes of the expectant congregation, pulled away with might and main. Now the curtains were very old, having been placed there many years before ; as the churchwarden continued to pull and tug they were

unable to bear the strain, and at last suddenly gave way with a loud rip. Mr. Thornycroft was pitched head foremost against an adjoining pew, but instantly jumping to his feet he gallantly charged again, and swept the rest of the curtains off all the way round. Then triumphantly throwing the spoils over his shoulder, he marched with them into the vestry.

There was a great altercation at the end of the service, the organist positively refusing to play if the curtain was not put up again. The churchwardens were for calling a vestry-meeting to decide this important question, but at last agreed to the proposition of the curate, to refer the matter at once to Mr. Hatter, the organist consenting meanwhile to continue to play. The unfortunate Vicar was inundated with letters on this tremendous difficulty. The curate wrote, so did the churchwardens, and Bracket, and one or two members of the congregation who were scandalised by the removal of the screen.

But the congregation were divided on this subject as well as on some others, some think-

ing that the dirty curtains were better away, others maintaining that for decency's sake they were necessary. Amongst the latter was Miss Monmouth, who complained that her devotional frame of mind was completely dissipated whenever Bracket seated himself at the organ during the service. For he had a knack of sitting on his bench and throwing his legs over, which movement each time it was executed, gave Miss Monmouth a very full view of the soles of his boots and of the widest portion of his dual garment.

Eventually it was agreed that the curtains should be put up again until the Vicar's return, when the whole matter should be discussed in full vestry. Thornycroft magnanimously conceded this, because he said he knew all the law of the matter was on his side. Organ-curtains, he urged, were not mentioned in the 'Canons,' and were clearly a ritualistic innovation which might lead to the introduction of lights, vestments, and incense. If the organ were allowed a coloured garment, the clergy would want one next. Lights were already

needed by the organist earlier than would be necessary if he had no curtains. And incense would be required to counteract the unpleasant odour emitted by the mouldy articles in dispute.

The winter season this year was a very severe one, and the curate's labour was proportionately increased. One case calls for special notice. In Bott's Lane was a family of the name of Scrannet. The man had been a labourer, and was in consumption. His wife came to the curate and said they were starving. He went to see them, and gave them relief each week.

One night he went at an unusual hour and found the Wesleyan minister there, with whom the curate was on very pleasant terms. As Mrs. Scrannet had previously told Plainton that the Wesleyans would have nothing to do with her, because they once saw her going to church, he supposed they had at last forgiven her, and he thought no more of the matter.

Another time when he went soon after this, he met there the Rev. Gideon Smith, the Baptist minister, an energetic young missionary

whom the curate did not know, but of whom he had heard a good deal. This meeting of various denominations in the same room struck Plainton as being a little odd, especially as Mrs. Scrannet had told the same story about the Baptist minister as she had about the Wesleyans—each had persecuted her because she would go to church occasionally.

The Rev. Gideon Smith seemed also to be surprised, for the next day he called on the curate and inquired about the Scrannets. Plainton told him all he knew about them.

‘Well, it is very strange,’ said the young minister. ‘Mrs. Scrannet came to me and said none of the church people would go to her house because she was fond of her chapel; and that you yourself would not give her anything, because you said she was a chapeler. She cannot be truthful.’

‘Certainly not in that matter,’ replied Plainton, laughing.

Then he gave a particular account of all that had been done for the family.

‘But she told me,’ he added, ‘that she

had been a dissenter, but you had all deserted her and refused to give her anything because she was so fond of her church, and used to hear her husband say the Catechism.'

In the following week the curate happened to make a call on one of the leading nonconformists whom he knew very well, when he learnt from him that enterprising Mrs. Scrannet had paid him several visits, and received food, clothing, and bedding. This induced the curate to prosecute his inquiries on the subject of the Scrannets, and he found that by judicious visiting and begging of members of different sects, and by playing them off one against another, these estimable people had scraped together an excellent assortment of goods of various descriptions.

In the course of a fortnight he found they had received three beds and bedding, two camp bedsteads, four railway rugs, two great coats, six dresses, and many bundles of left-off wearing apparel; two dozen of port-wine, two bottles of brandy, ten pounds of meat, three pounds of tea, several packages of sugar and

grocery, and considerable supplies of coals and firewood.

To each visitor Mrs. Scrannet continued to assert that they were starving; and having ascertained the visitor's religious persuasion, took care to mention how the opposite or rival sect had cruelly repulsed her, because of her own liberal religious principles. At length Pollington got too hot for Mrs. Scrannet, and she suddenly retired to another village a good distance off, where she recommenced her profitable calling.

Not long after his interview with young Gideon Smith, the Baptist minister, Plainton was passing his cottage, and noticed that the road near it was very thickly strewn with straw, to such an extent that the house seemed to be buried in it. On coming close up the curate observed a sheet of foolscap tacked to a tree in the little garden in front, and on it was written in a large, bold hand—

‘Mrs. Gideon Smith, jun., has been safely delivered of TWINS ! Ebenezer !

‘(Signed) G. S., jun.’

On making inquiry as to the meaning of this strange announcement Plainton learnt that Mrs. Smith had been confined, that her husband was in a state of great excitement at the result, and in order to stop the numerous callers who insisted upon coming to the cottage as soon as they heard of the interesting condition of his young wife, Mr. Smith issued bulletins at intervals during each day of her illness, and thus they were both left in comparative peace, except for the boys, who for hours during the day stood staring at the tree.

In the afternoon Plainton observed a fresh bulletin, to this effect :

‘ Mrs. Gideon Smith, jun., is as well as can be expected. The TWINS are hearty. How lovely are the messengers !

‘ (Signed) G. S., jun.’

The next morning the following alarming announcement collected a great crowd of sympathising readers :

‘Mrs. Gideon Smith, jun., is sinking fast !
Ichabod !

‘(Signed) G. S., jun.’

But in the afternoon the public mind of Pollington was relieved by this satisfactory bulletin :

‘Mrs. Gideon Smith, jun., is out of danger. The TWINS are doing well. Alleluia !

‘(Signed) G. S., jun.’

The young Baptist minister frequently called on Plainton, who was pleased to see his open, earnest face. They had several conversations on the spiritual condition of Pollington, and one day Mr. Smith asked the curate to go to his chapel and hold a prayer meeting. But he informed him that by law he was not allowed to do that, whereupon his visitor asked him if he would mind kneeling down where he was and praying for Pollington. The curate cheerfully complied. The two evangelists, both earnestly striving to serve the same Master, kneeled down and prayed that God would be

pleased to bless the work of His servants in the place, to convert the sinner from the error of his ways, to quicken the hearts of those who believed, and to inspire them with the spirit of love and the desire of holiness.

One other event at this season calls for remark. The members of the congregation had never recovered from the shock the Vicar's conduct in the matter of the curate's testimonial had given to their moral sense. They felt they were debarred from making any further present, either in money or kind, as they firmly believed that the Vicar would only deduct the worth of it from Plainton's salary.

It was therefore determined to make Miss Plainton a handsome present. Unknown to her or her brother a large sum was quickly raised, and invested in the purchase of a valuable gold necklet and locket, which were on New Year's Day sent to Margaret with a kind note from Miss Brougham, written in the name of the subscribers.



CHAPTER VIII.

RITUALISTIC AND CONTROVERSIAL.

AFTER the night of the encounter with Fortescue, Plainton continued to make frequent calls at Dargal Lodge. He did not meet Mr. Melody again, but he learnt from Mrs. Melody that he was travelling in Italy with Lord Castledown.

The only reference made to the memorable scene already described was by her, when she took the opportunity of saying to the curate, unobserved by any one else, that ‘ Mr. Fortescue would not visit the house again.’

Miss Melody seemed to have more than recovered her usual spirits. There was an elasticity and cheerfulness in her manner which added another charm to her beauty.

The circumstances of the past were never alluded to by either Plainton or Mona. But that night's event had made them fast friends for ever. The curate felt how grateful she was in the happiness which beamed from her face whenever she met him. There was now no reserve or restraint on her part in his presence. She knew how much she owed him, and was proud to think of him as one to whom she must always feel herself indebted.

They had always a great deal to tell one another. Mona's favourite recreation was to sit under the linden or the birch, when the weather permitted, or to walk round the grounds, and to tell Plainton her views of life, of religion, of the unseen world ; to give him her opinions on art, literature, or the passing topics of the day.

He was astonished at her grasp of mind, her acute observation, her original remarks, and was especially pleased by the reverent regard she had for anything sacred. He, on his part, found the notions floating in his own

mind assume a more tangible, practical form after discussing them with her.

He had many long conversations with her on the state of parties in the Church and their probable future. This was to him a question of absorbing interest. One evening when they were on this topic, she said, laughing :

‘ Mr. Plainton, I believe you will one day quite join the Ritualists, and perhaps become a musty old monk.’

‘ I do not know,’ said he, thoughtfully ; ‘ I should like to do whatever would be most useful. The Tractarians and so-called Ritualists have done more for the people of England than any other body of men since Christianity was first brought here.’

‘ But you have not joined them ?’

‘ No, not yet ; I do not hold with their adoption of purely Roman practices, simply because they *are* Roman ; and I am not clear that they ought to oppose the wishes and commands of their bishops. But it is difficult for me to judge of this, seeing I am not in their position.’

‘They seem to have made enormous progress in the last few years.’

‘They have. And I have no doubt that in the next generation Ritualism will be dominant in England.’

‘And what will happen then?’

‘Judging from what I know now of the growth of Church principles amongst the masses, I believe that the artisan and labouring classes will become strong Ritualists; and holding that Catholic doctrine is of infinitely higher importance than any set of political opinions, will choose their representatives in Parliament accordingly, and carry everything before them.’

‘But that will endanger the equilibrium of classes. Culture, refinement, and the higher education, which are now making some little progress, will have to give way to fanaticism, bigotry, and superstition.’

‘No, no; the upper classes need leavening and teaching. With many brilliant exceptions they are almost always on the side of

oppression and selfishness. They prefer refinement to justice.'

'But that sounds rather paradoxical. The illiterate classes are to teach the educated! Do not the people walk on their heads in that sublime world of yours?'

'Not at all. All the great movements which have permanently affected the world for good have originated with the lower orders and moved upwards. The establishment of Christianity itself, for instance.'

'But the instance of Christianity is unique. It was a direct and miraculous intervention of a higher Power.'

'Yes, but working by human means and instruments. Every other movement that is good proceeds from the same source, and is controlled and directed by the same Power.'

'I cannot but think that if your forecast of the future be correct, the good to be gained will be counterbalanced by the grave dangers and unknown perils attendant on such an unnatural order of things.'

'The unknown is always terrible. The de-

velopment of which I am speaking will be too gradual to disturb the balance of classes. I trust also by that time that the Ritualists will have those to lead them whose proper province it is to do so.'

'You mean the bishops?'

'Yes.'

'Poor bishops! I wonder they live as long as they do, considering how they are kicked by Evangelicals, and thumped by irate Ritualists.'

'Well, they do have a lively time of it. But it is their own fault in a great degree. They will not see the signs of the times. They act too much from expediency, and because of popular clamour.'

'So do most men in high office, I think,' said Mona.

'They do. Nothing showed this more clearly than the Denstrood Ritual Judgment. It was carefully and cleverly worded, but it displayed the cleverness of the adroit special pleader rather than the calm, impartial, fearless mind of the English judge. I

should hope they all have the manliness to be heartily ashamed of it by this time.'

'I suppose there can be but little doubt that the majority of the judges were more anxious to put an end to the so-called innovations than to declare the known law.'

'Yes, and in so doing they struck a blow at the freedom of the Church and the rights of Englishmen. It is not the office of the judge to *make* law, but to declare and explain it.'

'Still, the persistent revival of obsolete practices, together with the strong tendency manifested by some of the clergy to accept and teach Roman doctrine, were symptoms rather alarming to old-fashioned folks.'

'No doubt it must be so at first. We cannot revive long-forgotten truths without frightening those who never heard of them. It is true some few men raked up a little rubbish, and having re-gilded it, exclaimed, "How lovely!" but fools are plentiful everywhere.'

'They ought to be much obliged to you.

I wonder how much you would like to revive ?

‘All that tends to advance the spiritual welfare of the people. First of all, the living voice of the Church must be heard speaking through its lawful synods, and the Church, as a corporate body, should govern itself by its own decrees. Then we want more freedom for the individual life——’

‘Oh ! oh !’ exclaimed Mona, sniffing ; ‘I smell the fusty old monk coming. I see his uncomfortable sandals and shorn pate. What dreadful colds you will catch ! And you will not be allowed gruel, as that would be pampering the flesh.’

‘No, Miss Puritan, I do not know that I myself could stand the yoke to which those good men submit. There, again, I cannot hold with those who proclaim the superior sanctity of the monk to that of the married priest. God made me a man before He made me a priest.’

‘I see your mind is not quite made up. But, judging from the progress you have made

in the comparatively short time I have known you, I think I can anticipate the end.'

'It is more than I can do.'

'You will not go to Rome?'

'God forbid!' said the curate, fervently. 'Ritualism is the antidote to Romanism. Hence the bitterness and hostility displayed against it by Monsignor Cumming and others of the Romish sect. But what is your anticipation? I am dying to know.'

'Are you? Well, I shall wait to see first if I am right, as I mean to be a true prophet.'

It was rather late when Plainton left that night, and as he walked through the Grove he heard some one behind him. As it was a public road it might be only an accident. But ever since the night on which he had determined to interrogate whoever he might find following him, he had been on the look-out for the man with the felt hat, as he thought he should know him again. But he had seen nothing of him.

Margaret, however, was still of opinion that

they were watched since that night, but by a woman. She maintained that on several occasions she had observed behind them a tall, thin woman in a waterproof. Plainton thought this a mere accident, and did not believe that there was any one concerned in the matter but the man.

The curate walked on through the Grove. Determining to find out if he were followed by accident or design, he stopped and listened. The sound of the approaching footsteps was heard for a second or two, and then ceased. Plainton walked on as before, and again stopped suddenly, with a similar result. He surmised that he was being deliberately followed, as an ordinary traveller would not have stopped.

He felt that the opportunity to unravel the mystery had arrived at last, and he resolved not to let it slip by without an attempt to know who was watching his movements, and for what purpose. Luckily he had no books with him that night, so that his hands were quite free, with the exception of a small walking-stick. He walked gently on till he came into

the Molton Road, and having proceeded down the highway for a few seconds, suddenly faced about and walked rapidly back, so as to meet the approaching stranger.

The night was rather dark, but there was light sufficient for Plainton to observe that he was followed by a man whose outline somewhat resembled that of the spy in the wide-awake whom he had previously seen. This sudden movement of his clearly disconcerted the fellow, who hesitated for a moment and then, suddenly turning round, began to walk at a rapid pace in the opposite direction.

Plainton quickened his steps, so did the man his. Fearing he might lose him, the curate doubled. The man gave a single glance over his shoulder, and set off running at the top of his speed. Plainton was a good long-distance runner, and had often in days gone by, to get an appetite for breakfast, run a mile in a little more than five minutes. He felt confident he should be able to run the man down.

The Molton Road was intersected at right

angles by a number of narrow lanes which ran into the Plashley Road. The pursued turned up the first of these, sprang over a fence, and cut diagonally across a short field. Plainton followed, but for a moment or two lost sight of the enemy, who, emerging from the field, was suddenly hidden by two cottages. Plainton caught sight of him again as he crossed the lane and entered into another field which bounded the canal. His object appeared to be to reach the bridge over the canal, so as to get into the plantation beyond, where it was very doubtful if any one ignorant of the ground could follow him.

The curate saw that he must catch him before the bridge was reached, and therefore endeavoured to increase his speed. The man, finding that he was losing ground, suddenly headed towards the canal, which was bounded on the near side by a high bank, and took a flying leap at it. He could not have hoped to clear it, but probably risked reaching the other side in order to baffle his pursuer. He disappeared, and Plainton heard a great splash.

When he came up to the spot he could discern nothing. But the night was now very dark, and the wind blowing hard, so that he could not have seen nor heard the man's movements if he came again to the surface.

The bank was too high for the curate to descend without imminent risk of falling in; he therefore hastened on to the bridge, which was some fifty yards off, and looked eagerly along for the fugitive. But he could discern no trace of him. It was now beginning to rain heavily, and having waited a considerable time he returned to his lodgings.

When he told Margaret all that had happened she was much frightened.

‘Do you not think that you ought to put it into the hands of the police, and not run any more danger?’

‘I have nothing to put into the hands of the police. I see a man in the highway who I think is following me, and I run after him. The police are such an astute body of men that they might say, “No doubt, sir, he was frightened at your wild appearance, and

thought you wanted to rob him. It's a wonder he did not lock you up."'

Margaret laughed.

'No, I will work the matter out myself. Besides, I do not know who may be concerned in this business, and I may think it desirable not to let it be made public.'

For Plainton had already begun to connect the man with Dargal Lodge, although at present he could see no reason why he should be so long and so persistently watched.

Early the next morning he went to the canal and looked carefully along the bank. He could find no trace of last night's adventure. He clambered on to the bridge and looked below. He thought he saw something dark in the weeds close to the bank. With immense labour he got down by the plantation as near to the object as he could. He then saw that it was a felt hat which had attracted his attention. By the aid of a stick he hooked it out and examined it. It was very old and greasy. He searched for the owner's name. In the crown he

deciphered the word 'Tonford,' probably the name of the place where it was sold. Turning back the lining he thought he could discern on the leather the initials E. K. or H. badly written. He again sought for traces of footsteps on the bank, and at last found marks of disturbance beneath one of the trees. But the heavy rain during the night had most likely obliterated all footprints. The probability seemed to be that the man had clambered out close by and left his hat behind him, while Plainton was making his way towards the bridge.

Throwing the hat into the stream, he gave up all hopes of tracing the fugitive or of discovering his identity for the present.

It was in the week after his conversation with Mona on Church development, that Plainton made the acquaintance of a man who had put forth extremely energetic efforts to revive in the English Church one of the great institutions of mediæval Christianity for fostering the spiritual life. With what success his efforts had been attended so far, he himself shall relate.

Through a common friend, the curate received an invitation to visit Father Polycarp and inspect his convent at Wakeham. He had often heard this singular man preach and lecture, and much admired his courage, self-sacrifice, and great gift of engaging the attention of a mixed multitude, but he had not had before the opportunity of conversing with him.

Father Polycarp, as he was called, received him with great courtesy. He was a thin, pale-looking man, with a kindly but resolute face. Plainton was also introduced to the Mother Superior, who was closely veiled. He found her a woman of remarkable intelligence and of great fervour.

Father Polycarp related the principal incidents of his life with much freedom and earnestness, but with a certain odd kind of simplicity and ingenuousness which was almost comical. In speaking of his difficulties and disappointments he said :

‘I once admitted a very promising young man into my monastery. I almost expected

he would become a second St. Francis. He was full of spiritual fire, and would sometimes roll on the ground in his ecstasies. But all of a sudden he took a wrong turn. For one day I was obliged to rebuke him for breaking one of our rules in leaving the house without permission, when to my astonishment he threatened to black my eye—a most extraordinary speech for one so highly gifted. At last he refused to keep any rules except those he made himself, and as they were all different from what he had sworn to keep on entering, I was obliged to get rid of him.

‘Another brother after that greatly disappointed me, for he broke away from his allegiance, and when I found it necessary to part from him and told him he must go, he locked me out, and said I had better seek lodgings elsewhere as I was not comfortable, but that he meant to stay where he was. Most surprising conduct—quite inexplicable. I got him to go at last, but he carried off all my altar ornaments, which cost a great deal of

money, and I cannot persuade him to return them.

‘These are a few of my trials, but I must triumph in the end. I have made one monk in ten years, at a cost altogether of £15,000. But it took our holy father twenty years to do as much, so that we have made considerable progress since his day.’

In the evening a benediction service was held in the little chapel, which was very effective. Polycarp presided at the organ and sang some hymns faultlessly. The fresh voices of the nuns were very sweet and thrilling. Plainton could not but notice the extraordinary reverence with which they all regarded their spiritual father.

When a lay sister approached him to give any message, it was with eyes looking on the ground, and before speaking she genuflected.

As Wakeham was some distance from Pollington, the curate had arranged to stop the night. His cell was very plainly furnished. His bed was the most striking piece of furniture, owing to the coverlet being

worked with an enormous red cross reaching its whole length. As he was retiring to rest he could hear the nuns singing, and the effect was very soothing and subduing, as the sounds were borne to his ear upon the evening breeze.

But still more entrancing and awe-inspiring sounded their voices when, after he had been sleeping some hours he was awakened by a chorus, chanting with exquisite clearness and rhythm. He could well imagine he was on the threshold of Paradise, as these beautiful voices continued to charm the solemn stillness of the night. They sent his memory back to the early days of his childhood, when he experienced the tender care of a fond mother, now but lately gone to her rest, and when the terror of waking in the dark night was dissipated by her sweet, loving voice. As he composed himself to sleep again, these words of one of his favourite ballads echoed in his mind, till the repetition of the melody soothed him again to slumber :

‘I slept, and back to my early days
Did wand’ring fancy roam,
When my hopes were bright, and my heart was light,
And my own a happy home.
I dream’d I was young and innocent,
And my brow untrac’d by care,
While my parents smil’d on their darling child,
And breathed for his weal a prayer.’

‘Dear mother!’ murmured Plainton, half-dozing, ‘you are in peaceful bliss now! Watch over me till we meet again!’ Her happy, quiet face seemed close to his, and he felt as he had often felt since her death, that she had been with him to still and comfort him through the night, as had been her wont in his infancy.

He left early the next morning—not before Father Polycarp had given him a pressing invitation to come again. Much as he enjoyed his visit, he found his mind was not quite in harmony with all he had seen and heard. He thought too much reverence was paid to the blessed Virgin, to the detriment of the honour due to her divine Son. He quite regarded Mary as ‘blessed amongst women,’

but it seemed to him that Polycarp went dangerously near the Roman error of paying her divine honours ; and the curate's feelings revolted against what he considered to be a species of idolatry, as distasteful to her to whom it was paid, as it was derogatory to the honour due to Him who was her Son and also her Saviour.



CHAPTER IX.

THE VICAR IN A PASSION.

PLAINTON having received notice of the day when the Vicar would return, went over to the Vicarage to await his arrival, and see if there were anything he could do for him.

Presently he saw the fly drive up to the door, and hastened out to the hall-door to meet Mr. and Mrs. Hatter. Mrs. Hatter alighted first, with Hetty and the dog, then came the maid, and lastly Mr. Hatter, whom the curate was pleased to see looking so well. There were a few small packages with them, the bulk of the luggage having already arrived.

‘Your fare,’ said Mr. Hatter to the flyman,

when the packages had been placed inside the hall, 'is one shilling.'

'Well, sir, we usually expect a little extra when there's more than two people, as well as luggage.'

'The parcels were inside the fly, and therefore cannot be charged. I am not responsible for what other people choose to do.'

'It is rather a heavy fare, sir—four persons, a dog, and luggage. I have a sick wife at home, sir, and two of the youngsters down with whooping-cough.'

'Eh—eh—I really cannot encourage extortion. However, in consideration of your sick house, I will give you something extra, but it is not by any means to be reckoned as a precedent for future demands.'

'Thank'ee, sir, much obliged,' said the man, touching his hat.

'Eh—Plainton, have you got a penny?' These were the first words he addressed to his curate after his return. He produced the coin mentioned.

'There!' said Hatter to the man; 'there

is one shilling and a penny for you. But remember, it is quite exceptional. Good-day.'

The man gave a comical sort of smile, as if he thought it were rather a mild joke, and pocketed the money without a word.

The Vicar came in, and remarked :

'The extortion and greediness of these cabmen are really something too dreadful. I hope you never give them more than their fare,' turning to the curate.

'Well, I am afraid I do. I usually give eighteenpence from the railway station to my lodgings.'

'Eighteenpence ! and you are nearer the station than I am. This ought not to be. You are wronging other people by your false liberality.'

The curate thought this a somewhat curious greeting after so long an absence, but said nothing.

Having answered all Mr. Hatter's questions, he retired as quickly as he could.

During the week the Vicar held private audiences of his detective force, consisting of

Chine, Piggott, and Humm. He heard for the first time of the testimonial presented to Miss Plainton. It put him in a frantic state of mind. He had never liked her, for she was one of the very few women who was not in the least afraid of him. But now his hatred and bitterness were developed to the last degree.

For several days he wandered from his study to his bedroom and back again, stamping and raving, till his poor wife thought his mind was giving way.

A few weeks afterwards Plainton met him near the post-office, when he stopped to speak about a tea which it was proposed to give to the old women of the parish. The Vicar gave his curate certain instructions which he wished carried out by some of the district visitors.

‘But avoid making any cliques,’ added Hatter.

‘How do you mean?’ said Plainton, who did not understand the drift of the observation.

‘Eh—eh—don’t let the Broughams have much to do with it. They were very troublesome last year about the church decorations, and I think—eh—eh—they are inclined to influence your sister against me, for she seemed to side with them.’

‘I am sure you are quite wrong,’ returned Plainton, ‘for my sister has done her very best to promote harmony and goodwill, and to my knowledge went out of her way to prevent unpleasantness on the occasion to which you refer.’

‘Eh—I think you will find that she loses no opportunity of injuring me in the opinion of the parishioners, and of stirring up strife generally,’ rejoined Hatter, who could not forget the gold necklet and locket.

‘Indeed, you are quite mistaken.’

‘Well, it may be so. I wish I could think it. At any rate, it is better to be on the safe side with regard to the tea-meeting, so I wish Miss Piggott to have the superintendence of the affair.’

‘Very well.’

Plainton felt that the Vicar's suspicion with regard to Margaret was utterly groundless and unjust, and when he went home to luncheon he told her of his conversation with Hatter.

Margaret was naturally indignant.

‘I think I had better have an explanation with Mr. Hatter.’

‘Well, it may be as well to point out to him how causeless his suspicions are.’

‘I will go over at once.’

Margaret accordingly went to the Vicarage and asked for Mr. Hatter. She was shown into the drawing-room, where she found Mrs. Hatter, who told the servant to let Mr. Hatter know he was wanted.

Presently, Mr. Hatter appeared with a very pallid face and a painful attempt at a smile. But there was no mistaking the bitter hatred of his glance, the convulsive movement in his throat, and the twitching of his hands as he looked at Margaret.

‘Mr. Hatter, I want to know what you

mean by saying that I try to stir up strife in the parish.'

The Vicar started as if he had been shot. Throwing up his arms into the air, and gasping between his words, he shouted at the top of his voice :

'We must have a settlement!' Here he slammed the door, and turned and faced Margaret.

'You are the bane of my life ! You persecute me from day to day ! You dishonour me in the eyes of the people !'

Here he paused for a few seconds, while Margaret looked at him with profound astonishment. He continued to shout :

'All the mischief in the parish comes from you ! You go to all the parties, while my wife has never received an invitation !'

Here he literally danced on one leg, then on the other ; lastly, advancing one step nearer his visitor, he shook his fist in her face.

'Oh ! I understand now,' said she, compassionately.

'Yes,' shouted Hatter, throwing his arms

upwards again, 'I am the Vicar, and you treat me like dirt—you don't know your place. My wife is a peer's great-granddaughter—and you, you are only a curate's sister! My wife is a real lady—she is Lord Greyling's second cousin,—and you, you are nothing!'

'Dear me!' ejaculated Margaret, in amazement.

'You foment all the quarrels in the place. You aided the Broughams in insulting me at the church decorations.'

'Enoch,' interrupted Mrs. Hatter, 'you are quite wrong. Miss Plinton did all she could to make things pleasant. I observed it myself.'

'I know! I know! I saw it! You don't know your place,' hoarsely continued the Vicar, his eyes rolling wildly. 'You are full of stinking pride. You go to all the croquet-parties in a silk dress, as if you were not the curate's sister and did not live in miserable, poky lodgings!' Here he ran up to the table and struck it with clenched fists. Then he started

back, and placing himself in the attitude of a certain renowned wicket-keeper expecting a difficult ball, he stood with his hands on his knees and head bent forward glaring at Margaret in a kind of frenzy.

Suddenly he stood upright, and again throwing up his arms, shouted :

‘I am the Vicar ! I am the Vicar ! and you shall know it.’ Then, lowering his voice, he asked in a quick tone. ‘How dare you receive that gold chain and locket ? Eh ! What do you mean by it ?’ Here he turned right round on one leg, and shook his fists alternately at Margaret.

‘Poor man,’ she said to herself, for she now quite believed that the Vicar was in a kind of Italian fit, which he had acquired during the winter, or was developing a tendency to epilepsy. At the same time she could not help remarking the extremely striking likeness Hatter bore to Hetty while the fit was at its worst. The movements of the hands and feet and the passionate play of the features were an exact reproduction on

a larger scale of the phenomena exhibited by the child in her more violent tempers.

‘Enoch, Enoch! do be quiet,’ said Mrs. Hatter; ‘we shall have it all over the parish.’

‘Oh dear! oh dear!’ continued he, wringing his hands and stamping his feet; ‘I am the Vicar, and she comes and asks me what I mean.’ This thought appeared absolutely insupportable, and turning round short upon Margaret, he said in a low, emphatic voice:

‘You come to my house again and I’ll turn you out of it. Yes, I’ll send you out of it! I’ll—I’ll—yes, I will—I’ll ignominiously expel you—ignominiously—I will. Is this insult to be endured?’ he asked, looking upwards. ‘Is it to be endured? No,’ thumping the table, ‘it shall not be. Humble yourself instantly. Do you hear? Go down on your knees!’

‘Poor man!’ murmured Margaret.

‘Humble yourself instantly!’ roared Hatter. ‘Beg my pardon for insulting me, you Jezebel! Beg my pardon, and I’ll forgive you.’ Here he made a great flourish in the face of Margaret with his clenched hand.

He hoarsely shouted these words several times, throwing his arms about in the wildest manner, when, finding himself utterly spent, he fell back on a couch and continued faintly kicking his heels on the floor, while Mrs. Hatter sprinkled his face with eau-de-Cologne, and wiped away the saliva streaming down his beard.

He had now become speechless through passion and exhaustion, and Margaret quietly departed.

Plainton was surprised beyond measure on receiving Margaret's account of this strange interview, and as he could not have her continually exposed to this man's madness, insults, and violence, he on the following morning sent in his resignation.

The Vicar unctuously invited him to breakfast for the next day. He reluctantly went, when the old tactics were faithfully observed; flattery from Mr. and Mrs. Hatter, a bunch of flowers from Hetty, and an adjournment to the study.

‘Pray sit down. Eh--eh—I received

your letter, but I did not expect it.' Here the Vicar's voice trembled, and he pulled out of his coat a pocket-handkerchief which was once white, but which was now almost of a chocolate colour with the stain of tobacco juice.

'I thought the bond which held us together could not have been so easily broken.' Here he wiped the corner of his eye.

'No other course was open to me.'

'I really do not see why you wish to leave. You know the intense regard I have for you.'

'Well, I think after yesterday's affair no gentleman could possibly stay with you.'

'I am sorry to hear you say that, as I have not the remotest notion of the grounds on which you thus speak.'

'You said my sister and the Broughams stirred up all the mischief in the parish, and as I felt you were mistaken, I thought the matter had better be cleared up. When my sister comes over to you, you behave with monstrous extravagance, and threaten to turn her out of the house.'

‘I, my dear fellow ! I !’ exclaimed Hatter, starting back and lifting up his hands and eyes in horror ; ‘you are utterly mistaken. I am not capable of such a thing.’

‘My sister could not be wholly mistaken, making every allowance for natural excitement at your strange reception of her.’

‘There must be some misapprehension. Why should I desire to be rude to the sister of one I esteem so highly ?’

‘That is more than I can say.’

‘Now I come to think of it, Miss Plainton was very excited when she came in, and never replied to my kind greeting, but immediately attacked me. But I received her most kindly. I was extremely patient and forbearing. Ask Mrs. Hatter ; she was present the whole time. I made allowances for her excitable disposition, and took all her reproaches with Christian meekness. For the highest life ——’

‘Well, that certainly does not exactly agree with my sister’s account.’

‘But you know people in an excited state

of mind do not always remember quite accurately,' said the Vicar in an insinuating tone ; 'and, besides, imagination, when it is aroused, magnifies actions and words quite unconsciously.'

'That would hardly account for all the particulars I received of the interview from my sister.'

'I assure you I have not the slightest recollection of saying or doing anything at which Miss Plainton could take the least exception. I will carefully inquire of Mrs. Hatter all that I said, and if I have done or said anything which is in the least degree offensive to Miss Plainton, I humble myself at once before her. I beg her pardon most sincerely, and express the deepest regret. Does that satisfy you ?'

'If I am to understand that you are sorry for all that has occurred, and apologise for what you said and did, I will not say anything more.'

'I have not the slightest recollection of saying or doing anything that was unbecoming ;

but I at once apologise most humbly for all that has given offence. I express my deepest regret for it.'

'That is quite sufficient.'

'Then you withdraw your resignation, I presume?'

'I will think it over. I cannot give an answer now.'

'I think you should withdraw it at once. You cannot resign on the grounds of what occurred with your sister, without bringing me into disrepute. I shall have the whole parish in arms. If you send in your resignation now, people will want to know the reason, and will be sure to find it out. I trust to your generosity not to injure me by going away for any other assigned reason than ill-health or over-work. It would be exacting a very heavy punishment to let the real reason be known.'

'Well, you may trust me, I think, to act both justly and generously.'

'I do, I do. And that is why I should suppose you would at once withdraw your

resignation. You cannot think of leaving me in the lurch.'

'I will think it over.'

'You cannot possibly leave me now without injuring my character. When you do go, I want to get up a testimonial for you, and send you off with flying colours. Eh—eh—I had better give you back your resignation. Here it is,'—and he placed it in Plainton's hands, and continued. 'Eh, eh—I suppose Miss Plainton's account of the interview will be all over the parish to-day.'

'No, it will not. No one but myself knows anything about it, nor will any one if I do not wish it.'

'Thank you.'

The curate returned to his sister and told her what had passed, and added :

'As Hatter has fully and humbly apologised, I think nothing more should be said about it.'

'But are you going to leave or not ?'

'Well, I think I cannot very well do so just now, without injuring Hatter in the eyes

of the people,—perhaps later on I may. As he has apologised, we must forgive him fully, and let no one know what has passed.’

‘Very well.’

Plainton then wrote to Hatter formally withdrawing his resignation, but expressing a wish to go in the autumn, when Mr. Hatter had had ample time to find a man to his mind.

He saw the Vicar the next morning.

‘Eh—eh—I asked Mrs. Hatter about the interview with your sister and she quite agrees with my account of it.’

‘There was no occasion to refer to it again. I said yesterday I would think no more of it, and I meant what I said.’

‘We were very pleased, indeed, to get your letter. I think of engaging in a few months’ time another curate, to help you if you stay on. You said something in your letter about leaving in the autumn. Now, if you really think of going then, I should engage a different kind of man,—one to take your present position,—but if you give up that

notion I should engage one to assist and work under you.'

'I will make no engagement to stay on. If I go I shall give you definite notice, of course. You had better engage a man accordingly.'

'Eh—eh—I hope no one knows about the interview with your sister?'

'No, it will be kept to ourselves.'

'That's a comfort!' said the Vicar, in a really grateful tone.

Never again after that memorable interview did the Vicar look Margaret in the face. Whenever he saw her approaching, even though he was walking with his wife, he would run into a field, turn up a lane, get behind a gate, or even rush into a public-house rather than meet her. When he was preaching, if his eye happened to light on her, he would colour up, hesitate, and stammer for some seconds. The fact was that he felt that Margaret knew his true character now, and he shrank from the revelation he had made of what he knew himself to be.



CHAPTER X.

HETTY'S ILLNESS.

MR. HATTER received every Monday Mrs. Chine's report of the curate's doings during the preceding week. It happened one morning that he had been detained by her somewhat longer than usual, while his faithful detective gave him a long and particular account of the Plaintons' visits to Dargal Lodge, and of various conversations Mrs. Chine had had with one of the domestics living there.

When he returned to his study he found Hetty seated at his table, apparently annotating the sheets of his new book 'On the Solution of certain Ethnological Problems.'

In addition to this literary labour she had found an old and very foul meerschaum pipe, which she was at the same time vigorously sucking.

‘Oh! my darling, what are you doing?’ exclaimed he, rushing towards her and taking the pipe out of her mouth. But Hetty was already beginning to feel the effects of the foul poison, and soon was vomiting violently.

Hatter was on bad terms with Dr. Jolly, or he would have sent for him. But Mrs. Chine had reported to him that very morning that the doctor had said that the Vicar was only the fractional part of a man, and that if kicking him out of the parish would get rid of him he would do it to-morrow.

Hatter, therefore, sent Humm with a message to Dr. Tickell at the other end of the town to come immediately. After some delay he arrived, and said that the child was suffering from narcotic poisoning. The vomiting had probably saved her life. She, however, became very ill, and her parents were beside themselves with fear.

After hanging for some days between life and death, she seemed to get the better of the poisoning, but was then attacked by fever. Her condition was again most critical. The church bells were not allowed to be rung, no noise was suffered in or near the house, and the Vicar went about softly and sorrowfully, 'as one that mourneth for his mother.'

All the parish pitied him. His cantankerous manner disappeared, he contradicted nobody, he showed no ill-temper. Even his most inveterate enemies were softened by the change in the man's demeanour, and every one hoped he would be spared the awful trial of parting with his child. Night after night he and his wife sat up watching her, anxious, sorrowful, and feverish. His favourite pursuits were left untouched, he could think of nothing but his child.

At length the struggle between the opposing forces of Nature and disease reached a climax. A few hours would decide as to the probability of her recovering. Drs. Penne-

father and Tickell had been to see her late in the day. If she slept well during the night there was a fair expectation of her getting over it.

It was midnight. Mrs. Hatter, in her dressing gown, was watching by the sick child. The bedroom door opened and her husband entered. He had taken off his coat and waistcoat, and had neither shoes nor slippers on his feet. He was much excited, but the overmastering fear of disturbing Hetty controlled his movements. He came softly up to the side of his wife and whispered—

‘Darling, what do you think of her? Will she get through the night?’

‘I hope so,’ said Mrs. Hatter, not taking her eyes off the child, ‘but God only knows.’

‘Ah! there it is,’ hoarsely whispered Hatter, plucking her sleeve. ‘Does He know? Does He know? Eh?’

His wife glanced away from Hetty for a moment and looked at her husband.

‘Of course He does. Why, what do you mean?’

‘Can He do anything, can He do anything? Eh?’

‘Oh! Enoch, I wish you would go to bed and not disturb me. You want some rest.’

‘Darling,’ said he, bringing his mouth to her ear, ‘we have not prayed together since we were married; there may be something in it, don’t let us lose the chance.’

Mrs. Hatter looked at him for a moment, the tears came into her eyes, and she nodded assent.

They knelt down, the mother still looking on the face of her child. Each waited for the other to begin. At length Hatter, glancing up into his wife’s face, said:

‘You pray, darling. If it can effect anything, mental acquiescence in its efficacy is necessary, I believe. It had better come from you.’

In all this the Vicar was perfectly true to his own character. At the last moment, as

a drowning man is said to grasp at a straw, did it occur to him that everything had been tried except prayer. When the child's illness began to assume a serious form his curate had asked if he would have the prayers of the congregation, and to his surprise Hatter had declined.

But now the thought took possession of him that there might be something in prayer, that there might be some invisible, spiritual force available which could not be subjected to the known tests of physical science, and with his usual pertinacity he was bent upon trying it.

Mrs. Hatter began the Lord's Prayer. When she had got about half-way through it Hatter burst in loudly with the agonised cry—

‘O God ! have mercy on my child !’

Mrs. Hatter clutching his arm, exclaimed in a loud whisper :

‘Oh ! Enoch ! You have killed her !’

She looked breathlessly at Hetty, while her husband, broken-spirited, miserable, and in despair, hid his face in his hands.

The noise had disturbed the patient, but happily only for a second or two. She turned her head over, moved her little hand, and then was softly sleeping again.

When Dr. Tickell came in the morning he said there was a decided improvement, and that he thought the worst was over.

Yes, God heard the father's prayer, and those of the many who pleaded for him. His child was spared. The shadow of death passed away, and the Vicar's strange, hard heart, so cold, cruel, and selfish, was for once, at least, moved with tender and grateful feelings.

Had he known how to avail himself of the sympathy his trouble had created, he might, perhaps, have reinstated himself in the good opinion of his people, most of whom were generous hearted, and quite capable of acting nobly and forgivingly. But as the danger passed away the man's evil self returned, and soon dissipated the kindly feeling which had been aroused on his behalf.

One instance, out of many, will suffice to

show this. It was only a fortnight after Hetty's happy recovery that Plainton had occasion to go one morning to the vicarage, where the Vicar was expecting him, when he found Mrs. Cockburn and her daughter Christabel there before him.

As the Confirmation was close at hand, the curate thought she had probably come for her daughter's ticket of admission, Miss Cockburn having been away from several lectures owing to her delicate state of health.

Plainton waited in the ante-room. The door leading into the drawing-room was partly open, and he became the unintentional witness of a painful scene. The Vicar was speaking in a loud, angry tone :

‘Your daughter has not attended the lectures, and has no right to expect her card.’

‘But she has been away only a few times, quite unavoidably, and I feel sure that she understands her obligations, and is desirous of carrying them out.’

Now Hatter had an intense dislike for Mrs. Cockburn, for she had positively declined to

take a district when the Vicar had peremptorily requested her to do so. He was, therefore, not likely to treat her with any more consideration than he was obliged.

‘That is not sufficient. It is *I* who have to certify to her fitness, not *you*.’

‘Well, surely you can satisfy yourself on that matter now?’

‘Let her come then into my study, and I will examine her there;’ and he walked towards the door. Mrs. Cockburn rose to go as well. Hatter turned round short upon her, and exclaimed:

‘I cannot have you. I must have her to myself.’ The girl, who was very young and very nervous, was sitting at the table, pale and agitated.

‘But Christabel is not well, and is very nervous. You surely cannot object to her own mother being present?’

‘Take her and examine her yourself then,’ shouted the Vicar; and at the same time he took off the table a large brass-bound prayer-book, which he threw across the room to Mrs.

Cockburn. It struck her on the wrist. She gave a start of pain and surprise, and turning to her daughter, said :

‘Christabel, dear, we had better go.’

They both left without another word. Mr. Hatter slammed the hall door after them. Then he sat down in the hall and beat his heels on the floor cloth. Suddenly starting up he exclaimed :

‘I am the Vicar, and they treat me like this!’ Hereupon he banged-to the drawing-room door after Hetty’s fashion. Lastly, rushing into his study, he smoked furiously for two hours.

Plainton, thinking he had better call when Hatter was in a calmer frame of mind, departed without speaking to him. The Vicar’s behaviour gave so great a shock to Miss Christabel’s feelings, that she could never afterwards be persuaded to go up for Confirmation.

A few days after this incident the Plaintons received an invitation from the bishop to a garden party at Rocket House. As there

appeared to be nothing to prevent it, they arranged to go. Margaret looked forward to the day with a certain amount of interest and curiosity, for her brother had given her a most amusing account of the last he was at. He described the uncereemonious rush of his brother clerics towards the ices and claret-cup, the varieties of their costumes, evidently got up with a careful appreciation of their theological opinions, and the curious, inquiring look with which they regarded one another as they paced up and down on the lawn.

He told her how he stood by the side of one clerical lady while she swallowed, with scarcely a second's interval, and without a change in her countenance, two strawberry ices, three creams, and a cup of coffee.

‘I expected every moment,’ he said, ‘to see her collapse or explode. But no; she walked away with a virtuous stride, as if she had discharged an important, if not sacred, function. I was profoundly astonished at the clerical female's capacity for ices. I have been unable to account for it, unless it is due to a craving

of nature after the continual boiling up to which their system has been subjected in perpetually hearing their husband's sermons. Poor things ! they have a sad time of it.'

Hatter had also received a similar invitation, but his was for a gathering a week earlier than that to which his curate was invited. The Vicar had heard from Mrs. Chine that Plainton and his sister were going to the bishop's garden-party, and that Miss Plainton was making herself a new frock for the occasion,—'as if,' remarked the pious district visitor, 'she could not better employ her precious time in visiting the fatherless and widow than in such frivolities and idle vanities. She, of all people, ought to remember that "the time is short."'

Early on the morning of the garden-party, Plainton received a request from the Vicar to go over immediately. He hastened to the Vicarage, when Hatter said :

'Eh—I am sorry to disturb you—but are you very busy to-day ?'

'No, not more than usual—except that I

am going to the bishop's garden-party this afternoon.'

'Eh—I was at one last week—stupid affair. Eh—do you wish very much to go?'

'Not I, but it looks disrespectful to be away always. I was not able to go to the last.'

'Eh—I can easily explain that to the bishop, as I shall see him next week. But if you do not really care about it I shall be very glad if you will undertake a little commission for me instead.'

'Certainly, I should be most happy to undertake it, but I have promised to take my sister to Rochet House, and I rather think she has been looking forward to it, and making some little preparation to go.'

One of the Vicar's yellow gleams shot forth from his eyes as he said :

'Eh—it is a pity your sister should be disappointed, but I have no doubt that I can by-and-by arrange something for her far more enjoyable. The business I want you to undertake is of the utmost importance. I cannot do it myself, as I have to consult Dr. Penne-

feather about a spot on Hetty's back, and I cannot entrust it to any one but yourself.'

'If it is of such paramount importance and cannot be discharged by any one but myself, I am sure my sister will willingly forego the garden-party in order that I may undertake it.'

'Really, it is very good of her. Give her my kind regards, and tell her how much I am beholden to her for her self-sacrificing courtesy. Eh—I want you to go to Brinsmead and take this note to Mr. Shuttleworth. He has a copy of Hakluyt, and I shall be glad if you will kindly make a few important extracts for me. I must have them in time for this evening's post, as the printer is waiting for them. Charge your railway fare to me.'

Plainton wondered if this business could not have been arranged for another day. He thought it rather odd, but said nothing more.

When he told Margaret, she simply remarked :

'You have promised to go ?'

'Yes ; I would have attempted both Brins-

mead and Rochet House, but I see on looking at his instructions that it will be impossible.'

'Oh! you must not knock yourself up. By what train shall you return, do you think?'

'I shall try to leave by the 5.30.'

'Well, I will meet you at the station, and we will go for a little walk instead.'

'I am very sorry and vexed about it, but I could not refuse to go, although I cannot help thinking that he could have arranged otherwise.'

Hatter was looking out of the Vicarage window in the evening, and watched Margaret in the distance walking towards the railway station. A satisfied smile appeared in his face as he muttered:

'Ah! my fine lady, I have dished your sport for to-day. So you must have a new dress to trail at Rochet House. I know how you have been looking forward to it. Ah! ah!' rubbing his hands, 'won't you be disappointed! You will never forgive me this—a woman's wounded vanity never forgives. You may walk proudly along, as if you did

not care, but ah ! ah ! the iron has entered into your soul.'

'Enoch,' said Mrs. Hatter from within, 'what are you talking about ?'

'I am merely arranging the divisions of my sermon, my dear, and going over the more important parts.'

Mrs. Hatter gave a short snort and remarked :

'It must be a very comical, one to cause so much laughing and chuckling.'

'I am going to preach on love and self-sacrifice as characteristics of the highest life, and I was thinking how nicely it would fit in with the circumstances of some of the congregation. The preparation of one's sermon,' assuming a very solemn tone, 'is a most anxious——'

'Oh ! well, you need not talk shop to me ; I have more than enough of it. Do you know if the Plaintons have gone to the bishop's garden-party ?'

'They were going,' said Hatter, turning round and smiling benignly—'they *were* going,

my dear, but they have kindly sacrificed themselves to me. Plainton has gone to Brinsmead on important business, and his devoted sister cannot go to Rochet House without him, though, by heavens !' suddenly changing his tone and speaking with energy, 'I think she is almost capable of it.'

'I dare say she would be, if she thought it necessary. I think it is a pity you interfered.'

'Do you ? I could not let the chance go by. A bishop's garden-party does not take place every day.'

'But you will have plenty of opportunities of annoying her, without interfering with the garden-party. She will know you did it on purpose, for she is not such a born fool as her brother is in matters of that kind, and——'

'I want her to know I did it on purpose,' interrupted Hatter ; 'as for her brother, I think he believes anything I choose to say. A more credulous ass I never met.'

'Don't you count too much on it.'

‘I do not. I know all the changes of his face, and can reckon his thoughts to a nicety. With regard to the garden-party, the bishop spoke very highly of Plainton when he came here, and it is just as well he should not see him oftener than one can help.’

‘Oh! I think you are quite safe on that score. Plainton is very poor, and is evidently without influence in the Church.’

‘Ah! but bishops sometimes, by accident or eccentricity, or through that universal perversity which “is the fault and corruption of the nature of every man,” and from which even episcopal flesh is not wholly free—they do sometimes give a living to a deserving man, who perhaps has absolutely no other claim upon them than his ability and length of service.’

‘A very rare case, though,’ put in his wife.

‘Happily it is. But I fear it is becoming more common every day, owing to the radical tendencies of the age.’

‘What a boon to the times is a conscien-

tious Conservative !' said Mrs. Hatter, with a wink.

'He is,' rejoined her husband, jocosely ; 'especially when he has nothing to gain by his principles.'

Here the amiable pair laughed heartily, and then went in to feed, for this term better expresses the process than any other. Dining would not accurately define it, since to that word we usually attach something of refinement, the satisfaction of the bodily appetite being the lowest and least pleasure we connect with it. The meeting together of those we love and esteem, or whose acquaintance we hope to make, or whose opinions we desire to hear ; the rest after hard toil or anxious thought, the attractive toilet of the ladies, the careful dress of their companions, the appropriate arrangement of the table, with its polished plate, sparkling glass, and sweet flowers ; the pleasant converse, the harmless jest, the bright, sparkling flow of easy talk on matters of the day, the exchange of witty or graceful compliment—these all

aid in making up the real enjoyment of dining, a satisfaction which should have in it always more of the intellectual than of the physical, of the spiritual than of the animal.

But with the Hatters it was purely a physical pleasure, the consumption of so many ounces of solid and liquid matter in answer to a bodily craving. Not a word was spoken by either till the table was cleared and there was nothing more left to devour, when they both sighed to think that their appetites were gone, and resumed their philosophic remarks on the world in general and Pollington in particular.

They were presently interrupted by the servant coming in to inquire if they wanted the boat on Monday.

‘Yes,’ replied Mrs. Hatter, ‘the small one at two o’clock. Hetty cannot go this time, because of her spots. Tell Humm to be there.’



CHAPTER XI.

A WATER-PARTY.

HETTY, having now recovered from her illness, was taken out a good deal, and kept in the open air as much as possible. Sometimes, to amuse her, as well as to ease his own mind of parish cares and troubles, and soothe his ruffled temper, Hatter would take a boat a little way up the stream, and pulling in under a favourite group of old willows, aspens, and one or two immense, wide-spreading trees, would remain there for an hour or two, Mrs. Hatter reading while her husband read or wrote.

Occasionally Miss Piggott would be invited to go, in order that she might take care of

Hetty. In that case a larger boat was used, and Elijah Humm pulled them up to the retreat, and called for them again at an appointed hour. If Hatter was particularly anxious to be quite quiet, he and his wife would go by themselves without the child, Humm as before discharging the duty of boatman.

The retreat under the willows was a well-known spot. The stream had gradually washed away a great deal of the soil year after year, until one or two of the largest trees seemed to stand forth from the water, and portions of their far-reaching roots were visible. There was one enormous veteran, which threw its great arms over the stream as if it were some amorous giant trying to clasp in his embrace the coy nymphs of the river. It was celebrated for miles round on account of its size, beauty, and the fantastic shape of its spreading limbs.

These shade-giving trees had much to answer for. Under their benign influence how many thoughtless worshippers of the more lovely sex had made known the passion

which consumed them, and received there the first soft kiss of happy love ! If the leafy giant which guarded the retreat would only speak, what entrancing scenes could he not relate ! Under his shadow, when light was departing, a happy pair had oft embraced, and heart to heart, and lip to lip, with arms entwined around each other, had sighed away the charmed moments, vowing promises too often broken.

Plainton had frequently seen a young, passionate adorer rushing on to his fate in some light skiff, the object of his aspirations adroitly steering him within reach of the irresistible spell of the mighty guardian of the group.

But who is strong enough to resist the wiles and fascinations of the fair ones who can boat ? Some people are fond of maintaining that woman is never so dangerous as when she begins to thaw at a ball after her fifth or sixth dance ; but we think, from a memorable experience, that she is far more to be feared at a water-party.

Consider how cunningly and yet with what seeming simplicity she decks herself out for the fray. Look at the light, gauzy dress ; at the studied negligence of the fancy neckerchief, with its carefully-chosen tint subtly complementing the hue of the cheek ; at the large summer hat, with its graceful lines and its bewitching plume ; and say, must he not be less or more than human who is not greatly, if not irretrievably, moved by this accumulation of captivating prettinesses ?

Many an unsuspecting youth has gone out in the bright morning to a water-party a free man, and returned at night hopelessly enslaved past all redemption. Henceforth the image of that water-party is indelibly engraven on his memory. He recalls again and again all its petty details ; the vigorous pull up the stream, the camp fire, the light repast, the sparkling eyes which have slain him, the tender look, the soft voice, the gentle pressure of the hand, and the exchanged confidences. All these are links in the chain which led to the declaration of passion, followed by the

first thrilling embrace of the accepted lover.

After all these preliminary flourishes we fear our reader is preparing himself for a moving love-scene. We are sorry to be compelled to undeceive him, and we ask his pardon for having allowed the recollections of early pleasant days to carry us somewhat out of our proper track. We have no love scene to describe in this chapter. The circumstances attending our water-party have perhaps the charm of novelty, but certainly not the interest of a love-passage.

When Monday afternoon arrived, Hatter and his wife were pulled up to the retreat by Humm, and left there. It happened that Mr. Hatter, sitting in the stern of the boat, fell fast asleep; while Mrs. Hatter, absorbed in George Eliot's last book, forgot herself and her surroundings, and lived only in the page before her.

She was aroused to the consciousness of where she was by a gurgling sound, and by finding her position with her book gradually

becoming uncomfortable. Looking up, she saw that the boat had imperceptibly drifted away from the bank with the rising tide, and the stern had caught on one of the gnarled branches of the tree, which held it firmly fixed in one position. The gurgling sound was made by the water coming in over the end of the boat.

Hatter was still fast asleep. His wife caught hold of his arm, and exclaimed in a tone of alarm :

‘ Enoch ! the boat is filling with water !’

Hatter quickly jumped up, and, seeing the state of affairs, made a violent effort to release the boat. But the branch would not give way, and every instant the stern was getting more firmly fixed, whilst the bow continued to rise up higher in the air.

Hatter could not swim and was horribly frightened, for he had an intense dislike to coming in contact with water.

‘ My dear !’ he said insinuatingly, ‘ do you think you could feel the bottom by getting over the side and holding on ? If I at-

tempt it the tide will be sure to carry me away !’

‘ Oh ! no, it is much too deep for me. We had better call for help.’

Thereupon Hatter shouted, as well as his trembling fright would let him, while his wife, who had by far the stronger lungs, gave breath to a hoarse croak, which would no doubt have been of great service had there been any one near enough to hear it.

The water was now coming in very rapidly, and the feet of both of them were very wet. As soon as the Vicar found that the water was actually touching him he seemed to lose all self-control. Wringing his hands and rolling his eyes wildly round, he ejaculated :

‘ What shall we do ? In a few minutes we shall be at the bottom !’

He had been standing as near the bow of the boat as he could get, when it suddenly occurred to him that he might escape by the tree ; at any rate he would be a little farther off from the water. Telling his wife to keep at the prow, he very cautiously made his way

to the stern, and catching hold of the branch with some little difficulty he managed to clamber up into it.

Now that he was comparatively free from danger, he turned his thoughts to the property in the boat.

‘My dear!’ he called out from above, ‘I am quite safe up here, you will be glad to know, unless the tree gives way. Don’t you think you might paddle to shore with the oars? We cannot afford to lose them, they are almost new. Your clothes will keep you up; and you might take with you the book I was reading, it is rather an expensive work.’

‘Enoch! how ridiculous you are!’ replied his wife, to whose credit it must be said that her head was as cool as her feet. ‘It is quite impossible for me to reach the bank alone. Your book is under water, and I cannot see it. I am wet up to my knees, and you must help me up into the tree!’

Hatter was now sufficiently recovered to argue this point with his usual dialectic pertinacity.

‘Eh—eh!—there are several reasons to be assigned against that course being taken,’ he observed, through the foliage. ‘In the first place the branch will certainly break with your tremendous weight, and then two persons will be drowned instead of one, as seems likely to be the case at present. In the next place we shall lose the oars and the book, which will put us to considerable expense.’

But Mrs. Hatter had already taken hold of the branch.

‘Now, Enoch, you must catch hold of my hand and give me a pull!’

‘My dear!’ exclaimed her husband, angrily, ‘you must let go that branch, or you will have me down. I can hear the tree cracking!’

‘Really, Enoch, you are no better than a fool. My clothes are wringing wet, and the boat will soon be under water. I can’t wait any longer!’

‘Eh—eh!’ gasped her husband, with trembling voice, ‘I should have thought that your duty as a wife would have taught you

to be self-sacrificing, for the sake of your husband and child. The highest life——’

But he suddenly stopped, for Mrs. Hatter had managed to get one leg over the branch, and exerting all her strength had pulled herself up into the tree, which bent forward considerably as it felt the additional burden of her substantial form.

Hatter cautiously moved a little farther away from his wife, and at length got up into a higher branch, whence he endeavoured to take a view of the scene beneath.

‘It’s a pity,’ he remarked, in a querulous tone, ‘that you did not bring away the oars. I see there is one now floating away with the stream. And you really might have saved my book.’

‘I had quite enough to do to bring away myself.’

After a pause, she observed :

‘Well, Enoch, we cannot sleep here. Don’t you think you had better get down the tree and see if Humm is coming?’

‘I think not, my dear. I am quite safe

where I am. If I attempt to descend I shall probably fall into the water. You are much nearer the bottom than I am, and if you proceed backward cautiously you will no doubt reach the ground in safety. Even if you should slip, your clothes would most likely be your salvation, either by suspending you in the tree until assistance could be obtained, or by supporting you in the water.'

Whilst they were arguing this problem,

'Hallo! what's the row?' suddenly shouted a voice a few yards off in the stream. 'Anybody here?'

'Yes! help!' exclaimed together both the tenants of the tree, whilst Hatter feebly waved an arm and his wife energetically shook a leg.

A boat ran close in, and revealed the ruddy countenance of Mr. Chubb, who with one of his sons had been up the stream to leave two of the girls at a friend's house.

Looking up, he exclaimed in astonishment:

'Why, it's Mrs. Hatter! How, in the

name of all that is beautiful, did you get up there? and what have you been doing to your boat?

‘You had better ask what has the boat been doing to us?’ said the good lady, looking down complacently into Mr. Chubb’s open mouth.

‘It is a very lucky thing you have come,’ calmly observed the speculative Hatter from his higher perch,—‘otherwise the consequences to the parish might have been serious.’

‘Good heavens! I didn’t see you!’ exclaimed Chubb.

‘I have had to make way for Mrs. Hatter, whom I have saved from a watery grave with the utmost difficulty, and at the imminent peril of my own life.’

‘Well, we had better get you clear of this, and see to the boat afterwards.’

By Mr. Chubb’s direction, Mrs. Hatter endeavoured to place one of her feet on the seat of his boat. But the tide, having reached its height, was returning, and the distance was a little too great for her to manage comfortably. After several vain efforts she

did at last touch the seat with her toe, which had for some time been swinging backwards and forwards like the pendulum of a clock; but partially exhausted with the struggle, her hold on the branch suddenly relaxed, and she came down with all her weight upon the head of Mr. Chubb, who fell flat across the seat, whilst the unfortunate lady, striking herself on the edge of the boat, tumbled over into the water.

The two Chubbs instantly clutched hold of her, and dragged her into the boat. Whilst this somewhat difficult operation was being performed, a philosophic voice was heard calmly remarking from above :

‘ This comes of disobedience. Had you not got up into the tree you could not have fallen out of it.’

Mrs. Hatter was taken to the bank, looking a pitiable object. Her summer dress suffered considerably from the afternoon’s adventures. A large portion obstinately adhered to the branch from which she fell, and was seen for weeks afterwards fluttering in

the breeze like a signal of distress. In pulling her into the boat great rents had been made in the remainder, and her hat had floated down the stream. She took it all very coolly.

‘Dear me!’ she exclaimed, as she tried to tie her dripping rags about her, ‘I am hardly in a fit state to receive company, and the Shuttleworths are coming to dinner. I wish I had not asked them!’

The Chubbs returned to the tree to fetch the Vicar. But they found it much more difficult to get possession of him, for that gentleman had a mortal dread of coming near the water again. They got him on board at last, and having taken in Mrs. Hatter, rowed them both down stream to a landing-place at some two fields’ distance from the Vicarage, whence the damp and dilapidated pair hurried home as fast as they could.

In the course of the week Mrs. Chine reported in the village that the Vicar had taken Mrs. Hatter into a field, and having quarrelled with her because she would not

hold an umbrella over him to keep off the sun, had stripped the clothes off her back in his passion and pushed her into the river, whence she had been rescued by Mr. Chubb. Her Anne, she affirmed, had met Mrs. Hatter running back to the Vicarage without hat or bonnet, and in fact, with no clothing worth mentioning to cover her but the sleeves of her dress and her sunshade.

‘That dreadful tyrant, my dear,’ she observed to Miss Langley, ‘is worse than Jehu; for although he told them to throw Jezebel out of the window, he never tried to drown her.’



CHAPTER X.

MONA.

It was during Hetty's illness that Plainton one day met Arthur Melody by the river, who told him his sister was so seriously ill that they had been obliged to call in Dr. Jolly. He hastened on to the Lodge and found from Mrs. Melody that Mona had had another somewhat severe attack of rheumatic fever.

He continued to call frequently, and was relieved at last to hear that they had conquered the painful malady, and that the patient was rapidly improving. He contrived most weeks to spend an evening at the Lodge, when Mrs. Eugénie would

accompany him in some of his songs, and Mona's bedroom door would be placed wide open for her to hear the words. He insisted upon the invalid's choosing what songs she would have, and was delighted to find that she seemed so much better after the music.

Sometimes he would go early in the afternoon to read to her a devotional book, and talk over their favourite topics. The greater portion of the library of her grandfather, who was a studious clergyman and a great book-collector, had come to Arthur ; and Mona, in poring over volume after volume of English theology, had acquired a great affection for the queen of the sciences. Hence her unusual knowledge of religious controversy and nice discrimination between theological subtleties.

What quiet, pleasant hours they enjoyed as soon as she was convalescent ! When Plainton came to the house Mrs. Eugénie would run into Mona's room and say :

‘ Your father confessor has arrived, shall I bring him up ?’

‘I shall be glad to see him if he can spare time.’

‘Oh! he can spare time. He has brought a big bundle of books, as usual. I wonder how you can bear to look at those ugly, stuffy books. You cannot enter the Church, Mona; women are not admitted just yet.’

‘Go away, you silly woman, and find mamma.’

Mrs. Melody, anxious to gratify Mona, would endeavour to listen with an attentive face to Plainton’s readings, and to the animated discussion which ensued, but after the first ten minutes usually dropped off into a sound slumber.

Mona, propped up on each side by pillows, with writing-paper before her, would occasionally make a note, while Plainton, seated at a small table near the foot of the bed, would develop the subject which had been selected for consideration.

The surroundings of the room satisfied his taste and aided his reflections. Two vases of flowers stood on a very old-fashioned,

black, oaken chest of drawers, over which hung a lovely engraving of the Holy Family. In one corner, near the window, was a prie-dieu, and high above it a large crucifix. Over the mantel-piece was a copy of Holman Hunt's 'Light of the World,' and at the head of the bed was an exquisite 'Ecce Homo' in oils, which had belonged to her grandfather.

Other pictures of sacred subjects adorned the walls. There was one hanging opposite to *Mona*, which was an especial favourite of the curate's, not so much for its intrinsic worth as a work of merit, but for the realistic force and boldness of its treatment. It represented two angels carrying a child to Paradise, which was indicated by a bright garden in the distance. Beneath them was seen a sick-room, in which mourners were assembled round a bed, weeping over the child's dead body. The picture bore this motto: 'Your sorrow shall be turned into joy.'

It had been painted by a poor Italian

artist, to whose family Mona had showed a good deal of kindness. When his youngest child died, somewhat suddenly, the father, to relieve his sorrow, painted this picture and presented it to Mona.

There were two large wax candles on the mantel-piece and two more on the drawers. As soon as it began to get dark these were lighted, and a cup of Indian tea was brought in for Plainton, and thus concluded the afternoon's interview.

At length Mona was sufficiently recovered to venture out on warm days, when their theological discussions were carried on in the garden amidst the blooming flowers, and to the sweet accompaniment of the songs of birds.

The curate thought it a pity that Mona's really powerful and logical mind should not have the advantage of a regular and methodical training for the special subject which interested her; he, therefore, proposed that she should study Greek, with a view to reading the New Testament in the original,

and should master certain text-books which he had himself found useful.

She accepted the offer with grateful joy, and was soon found devoting herself to the acquisition of the delicate and beautiful construction of the Greek verb. As a change from grammar, Plainton set her to analyse Butler's 'Analogy,' a book considered somewhat old-fashioned or obsolete by many young sucking divines of the present day, but for which he always professed profound admiration. By means of continuous catechising he got Mona to master it completely. Other text-books were treated in a similar manner. Each chapter was analysed, then his pupil was required to make an analysis of the argument of the whole book ; and lastly, minute and searching questions were asked on each part. Mona's progress far surpassed her tutor's most sanguine expectations.

One summer evening Plainton arrived somewhat later than usual, looking very dusty and weary.

‘ You look so tired,’ said Mona ; ‘ what have you been doing ?’

‘ I have been attending a clerical meeting at Adullam College, and am quite done up.’

‘ Was it a very interesting gathering ?’

‘ Far from it ; they seldom are interesting,’ said the curate, in a disgusted tone.

‘ How is that ?’

‘ I cannot make out. The clergy are certainly as highly educated as any class in the kingdom, and yet at these meetings we almost always get an egregious display of egotism, ignorance, and obstructiveness.’

‘ Really you surprise me.’

‘ Now, fancy the rector of an important parish telling the bishop, in answer to his request that the clergy would discuss a certain subject at the ruri-decanal chapters, that he never intended to go to a ruri-decanal meeting even if he were summoned, as such meetings had no legal status.’

‘ I fear your patience has been much tried.’

‘ It has. But think of the poor bishop. When I heard the dull, illogical, gushing, or

insensate speeches which were hurled at his unfortunate head, I thanked Providence that I was still a curate.'

'Oh! poor man, what a state of mind you are in! But you need not necessarily become a bishop when you cease to be a curate, so I hope you will not always remain as you are.'

'I do not know. But I certainly can say although the remark is quite superfluous, *nolo episcopari*. However, it does not follow that I should ever have to preside over such meetings as these, for which Adullam College is celebrated. Happily there is not such an institution in every diocese.'

'You speak as if you would never get over it.'

'I shall not till to-morrow. It is the helpless condition of the miserable chairman which most excites my feelings. A man of culture and refinement to be compelled to sit in that chair for more than two mortal hours, and to be made an "Aunt Sally" of by every clerical maniac who thinks his opinions ought to be heard!'

‘Oh, oh! This is speaking evil of dignities. I really must call you to order.’

‘I beg pardon. It was a slip, and I humbly withdraw the unparliamentary remark. I am myself again, now I have let off the steam.’

‘You are over-tired. Come and have a glass of wine.’

‘Thank you, I shall be glad of it; for I came straight here without going home first, Margaret being away.’

‘You are good. Would you prefer some tea?’

‘Indeed I should.’

Plainton felt better after the tea. They then went out on to the lawn again, and joined Mrs. Eugénie.

Mona informed the curate that the following Monday was her birthday, and she hoped that he would spend with them as much of the day as he could.

Plainton readily promised.

‘Do you know how old I shall be then?’

‘No, I am a very bad judge of ages.’

‘Nineteen!’

‘Is that all!’ said he, in innocent surprise; ‘I should have thought you at least two years older.’

‘You rude man,’ said Mrs. Eugénie, ‘how could you imagine a lady to be older than she really is!’

‘But Miss Melody seems to me every way older.’

‘Worse and worse.’

‘You mistake me. I do not mean that her face is not young enough—excuse me for being so personal, Mona—but your mind and manner are a good deal beyond nineteen. I, as your grumpy tutor, may be allowed to say so much.’

‘I think we had better change the conversation,’ said Mona, laughing, ‘or I must be personal in return, now you are beginning to abuse my tutor.’

On the following Sunday Plainton had a very heavy day with the early celebration and the children’s service; he was therefore glad to

go to Dargal Lodge on Monday as soon as he could get away from the Vicarage.

He took his pupil, as a birthday present, a copy of the ‘*Lyra Apostolica*,’ and a splendid white camellia. Mona knew the book well. Plainton had carefully annotated most of the poems, and had written in pencil the circumstances under which several of them had been composed.

‘And which do you think has the most merit?’ she asked.

‘It is difficult to assign degrees of merit to poems written on so many different subjects. But I confess to seeing most beauty of thought and felicity of diction in that called “*Rest*.”’

‘Oh! that is Newman’s, is it not?’

‘Yes.’

‘What a wonderful man he is!’

‘He is the greatest mind of the century, and it is a matter of constant regret to me that I have not had the good fortune to know him personally.’

‘I like his “*Apologia*” immensely. How forcibly and winningly he writes! And what

a power and careless beauty there is in his sermons !’

‘ There is. I am glad you so thoroughly appreciate them.’

‘ But what a pity it is that he is lost to the English Church !’

‘ I am not so sure about that. I think he had done his work here. Had he not been such a giant, he might have been left. But the movement which he helped forward so greatly would probably—to speak after the manner of men—have been crushed or maimed had he remained.’

‘ That is difficult to understand.’

‘ Everything done by the Tractarians would have been attributed to his personal influence. Those opposed to the movement, and who have since been won over to its side, would not have seen the finger of God in it, as they do now. There was no single individual to take his place when he went over to Rome, and the movement had to struggle forward on its own merits.’

‘ I see.’

‘The consequence was that it took root not here or there, but spread all over the kingdom.’

‘It never struck me in that light.’

‘In the providence of God, a quiet resting-place has been found for His prophet, who now, I doubt not, helps by his daily prayers to perfect the seed he has sown.’

Here they were interrupted by Mrs. Eugénie.

‘Now, Mona, it is too bad. You promised me there was to be no Greek nor theology to-day, and here you both are at it worse than ever. Mr. Plainton, no more shop, please. I want you to hear Mona’s new piano which mamma has given her to-day.’

They went to the drawing-room, where they found a lovely-toned instrument from Messrs. Kirkmans’ workshop. Mrs. Eugénie played one or two pieces she had brought in honour of the day. They then went into the garden until luncheon-time.

While Mona and Mrs. Eugénie were looking over some new songs, Plainton busied himself with stringing loosely together some

laurel leaves, which, with the assistance of Arthur, he tied into a rough sort of wreath, which he placed on Mona's head, to crown, as he said, the garden's fairest flower and the heroine of the day.

He was much struck at the effect it produced at a little distance. As she bent her head forward, one caught sight of her pale, noble features, and her ample black hair set off by the wreath of dark green. She looked like a crowned Grecian goddess.

Whilst they were taking a last turn round the grounds they met Mrs. Melody, who came up to Mona hastily, and said, with tears in her eyes :

‘My dear, why have you made yourself look so sad to-day?’

‘So sad, mamma dear,’ she answered, in surprise ; ‘Mr. Plinton has crowned me the garden’s queen.’

‘Do take it off, child. It looks as if the crown of thorns had fallen out of your picture on to your head.’

‘Oh, you foolish mum!’ said she, kissing

her; 'how fanciful you are! I have no thorn now to trouble me.'

'Well, come in to luncheon.'

Plainton had to leave early in order to see some sick cases. But he came back after dinner to sing one or two songs and to hear Mona play.

How beautiful she looked with her glorious hair dressed in the fashion he most admired, and adorned with the white camellia! The dark shadow which had seemed so long to hang over the house, to-night had quite faded away. He felt no more heaviness of heart, no more dread forebodings. As he sat listening to her playing, he tried to assure himself that nothing could come between them to break up their friendship, and that whatever his future lot might be he would always have in her one whom he might boundlessly trust, and whose intercourse would ever afford him the highest intellectual satisfaction and repose.

When Plainton rose to go, Mona came out with him into the hall.

‘I have had such a happy day!’ she said, while a joyous expression lit up her face, quite different from the habitual half-smile of sadness which used to linger about her lips.

‘Have you? I am so glad. It is no more than you ought to have.’

‘I don’t know that, but I know I have to thank you for it in a great measure.’

‘It is very kind of you to think so.’

Plainton had reached the door.

‘I am coming with you to the gate,’ said Mona, throwing a light shawl over her head.

‘What a lovely night it is!’ remarked Plainton, looking up at the palpitating stars.

‘It is most beautiful. Mr. Plainton, I hope I do not take up too much of your time with our lessons.’

‘Not at all. When it is necessary we must postpone our meeting for a week, that is all, and you must do double work.’

‘It is very good of you to take so much trouble.’

‘It is a pleasant recreation to me, not a trouble or a labour.’

‘I have to thank you besides for giving me new views of many things. I shall never be sad again, I hope.’

‘I am very pleased, Mona, to be of use to anybody.’

‘I know. There is one thing more I want to say before you go.’

Plainton turned within a foot or two of the gate to hear Mona’s communication. She stood with the moonbeams falling on her classic face, and looked so pure, so good, and so beautiful, that her companion could not but regard her with profound admiration. Lowering her voice she said ;

‘I fear we are likely to leave Pollington early next spring.’

Plainton started. ‘You surprise me.’

‘I am not sure, so you had better know nothing about it at present ; at any rate before mamma, as the thought is too much for her.’

‘Where are you going ?’

‘To Spain.’

‘What ?’ he exclaimed in astonishment.

‘ If we leave England, I think it will be for Spain. Papa has been writing about it.’

‘ You astonish me beyond measure.’

‘ I have known it for some time, and I do not like to keep it from you any longer.’

‘ How quickly one’s dreams melt away !’ said Plainton, half to himself.

‘ I fear you will think me very selfish, but my object in telling you on my birthday is to ask a favour of you.’

‘ What is it, Mona ?’

‘ I want you to write to me occasionally, if you will. If we go, the probability is that we shall remain there. We shall not return to England again.’

‘ What ! are you to be exiled from your friends for ever ? I cannot realise such a thing.’

‘ I ought not to have told you to-day. We shall not be wholly separated. We can write to one another.’

‘ Yes, but—who is to take care of you, Mona ? Is there not something else behind this ? Tell me all.’

‘I have little but surmises beyond what I have told you. Papa has fallen in with the Marquis d’Estremos, who has just come of age, and is a distant connection of Mrs. Eugénie’s. He has offered papa an extensive but much neglected estate contiguous to his own, on very advantageous terms, and papa thinks of taking out an English engineer and surveyor to look at it. That is all I really know.’

‘It seems a very wild scheme.’

‘Papa is rather given to venturesome schemes, I fear. But you need not be under any apprehension about me, as I shall run no risks.’

‘I do not see how you can help it.’

‘I have no fear; and it is possible that poor papa might be induced to settle down at last, which will be worth all the sacrifices made in going, great as they will be.’

‘Well, I shall hope for the best, but I cannot say I admire the plan.’

‘Neither do I. It saddened me when I first heard of it, but it does not disturb me now.’

‘You are a wonderful girl.’

Mona laughed at Plainton’s ingenuousness. Then, speaking in a serious tone, she rejoined :

‘I am trying to carry out your teaching. I believe that God will order all for the best, and I am content to leave it with Him. It seems unkind of me to say anything about it to-night, but I do not wish to revert to the subject again until the arrangements are quite settled, and I thought I should like to have your promise to-night, if I may.’

‘Most certainly, my dear girl, you have my promise. To write to you will be something, but not to see you will be a great loss.’

‘Well, we will not talk more about it to-night. Should I go, I shall not forget your lessons on life and duty.’

‘But you will let me know immediately——’

He was interrupted by Mrs. Eugénie appearing at the hall door and calling out :

‘What are you people about ? I verily believe,’ she continued, coming towards them, ‘that Mr. Plainton has pulled out his Greek

Grammar and is giving you a last brush-up in the moonlight as a final treat on the birthday festival. What a dreadful man you are ! I would not have you for my tutor for all the star-dust of heaven.'

'That's rather strong language. I should hope——' began Plainton.

'I quite mean it. I would not have a lesson from you on any account. Your face frightens me as soon as you open your book. You look so as if you meant it.'

'You funny woman,' said Mona, 'how you rattle on!'

'I look upon Mr. Plainton as an unmitigated tyrant, as soon as ever he begins his lessons. Now, Mona, mamma wants to know if you are going to sleep in a tree with the birds. I shouldn't have said that, only I know it is not poor Mr. Plainton's fault. You are the tyrant now.'

'I have been telling Mr. Plainton about the Spanish scheme.'

'Oh ! you will catch it. It is supposed to be a great secret. You must come over and

see us, Mr. Plainton, when we are quite settled on our new estate.'

'I fear that will be impossible,' said he.

'Well, well,' remarked Mona, 'we will say no more about it until we get our marching orders. Good-night.'

'Good-night, God bless you.'

Margaret had been away from Pollington for some time, in order to visit her sister who was very ill. On her return her brother gave her an account of all his doings, and mentioned especially the birthday-party at Dargal Lodge.

Their conversations on parish matters generally took place in Margaret's bedroom, whilst she dressed her hair.

'You go to Dargal Lodge a good deal more than you used,' she observed.

'Yes, I do. But what of it?'

'Well, do you think it quite wise?'

'Wise! Why not?'

'I don't know if you have thought over all the consequences of becoming very intimate with a girl like Mona. She is an uncommon

character, and capable of very strong attachments.'

Plainton opened his eyes very wide as he said:

'That is why I like her. She is an uncommon character, and large-hearted. I look upon her as an embryo heroine.'

'Yes, but Pawley, you show her a great deal of attention, more than you have ever shown to a woman before, and she is naturally grateful for it. Have you considered your circumstances? Suppose you both should love one another. What will you do? You cannot marry.'

'Marry? Certainly not. I do not think that is necessary. Why, how dreadful you are talking! I wonder what Mona would say,' said her brother, looking round in alarm, as if he half expected to see the subject of their conversation suddenly appear, 'if she heard you mention such a thing.'

'Marriage, to people who have a strong liking for one another,' continued Margaret, brushing her hair very vigorously, 'is not usually considered very dreadful.'

‘ But with Mona it is quite different. How shocked she would be to hear you !’

‘ Well, Pawley, I do not wish to say anything to hurt your feelings,’ eloquently gesticulating with the hair brush, ‘ but I really think you ought to try to look at this matter as other people look at it, from a practical point of view.’

‘ I am perfectly practical,’ he rejoined, in an excited tone. ‘ I think that Mona and I understand one another. She knows I cannot marry, even if I wished,’ continued he with trembling voice ; ‘ and I feel sure she does not expect nor desire it.’

‘ I quite think she knows your position, and does not expect it ; but I am not sure that she might not wish it were otherwise.’

‘ What a dreadful thought ! Really, Margaret, I cannot imagine what has put such a notion into your head,’ he rejoined, with a distressed look.

‘ It is not an exceptional view to take of such matters.’

‘ But Mona is quite different from all other

girls I ever met,' continued her brother, emphatically; 'you do not see that.'

'I see it quite well, and that is what leads me to think that you ought not to become too intimate, for fear you should like one another more than would be well for your peace.'

'Do you really advise,' he asked, rising and walking hastily up and down the room, 'that I should not see her, not be with her, not talk to her, not look upon her face, not——'

'No, certainly not. I only want you to know what you are doing and whither you are going. Supposing Mona should love you——'

'Oh! that is perfectly preposterous. She would never think of such a thing. She is far above it. She simply regards me as a dear friend. We both know well that I cannot marry; are we, therefore, not to enjoy one another's society when we have so much in common, and are such a help to one another?' rejoined Plainton in a pleading tone.

‘It seems very hard to say so, but I think there is danger in such a course if you see much of one another.’

‘What is it?’

‘Well, such friendships have been tried over and over again, and, I believe, have always failed.’

‘How?’

‘The two friends have become too strongly attached to one another to live apart, and if it was impossible to marry have both been rendered miserable.’

‘Miserable? Why could they not go on loving and be satisfied?’

‘It cannot be. The world will not have it. The world dislikes heroics. Besides, such a relationship as you describe cannot exist in society as at present constituted. It is suited to the millennium, or some other Utopia, but will not do in this work-a-day world.’

‘Am I, then, because I am poor, not to love, not to have a woman friend?’ asked her brother, with difficulty getting out his words.

‘If you love, Pawley, will it not be to indulge a hopeless passion? And if the person you love should return your affection, as would probably be the case, will you not both be doomed to disappointment?’

‘I do not see how I can help loving people who are lovable,’ he remarked very simply.

‘That will be perfectly safe, provided you do not single out one to love infinitely more than all the others put together.’

He sighed. He felt there was a good deal of truth in what Margaret said, although in his present state of mind it sounded somewhat cold, hard, and worldly-wise.

The relationship which had grown up between him and Mona had been so gradual, and under such peculiar circumstances, that the possible consequences had never been considered by him.

He had even attempted to avoid an intimacy at the beginning of their acquaintance, but strange events had forced them to know one another, and with knowledge had come admiration, trust, and mutual regard.

But marriage, perhaps because of its utter impossibility in his case, had never once entered his thoughts. And now that Margaret had mentioned it, the notion jarred upon his feelings. It sounded commonplace to associate Mona with matrimony. True she was a woman, but something more, he argued, when he renewed the discussion with Margaret, for was she not different from all other women ?

‘And if I have a stronger regard for her than for others,’ he innocently remarked, ‘is it not because she is better, greater, nobler than they?’

‘Not necessarily,’ rejoined Margaret, quietly, ‘although I do think with you that Mona is an extraordinary girl and very highly gifted.’

‘But what do you mean when you say “not necessarily?”’

‘Well, a man generally thinks the person he loves to be something better or higher than all others of his acquaintances.’

‘But I do not love Mona in that sense.’

‘Nor did I mean to imply it. Had I supposed that such was the case I should not have spoken to you about it in the first instance. It may be possible to prevent a step which, once taken, is irretrievable.’

‘True. Good-night, Minerva,’ said he, kissing her.

‘Good-night, Prometheus,’ she rejoined, laughing.



CHAPTER XIII.

MRS. CHINE'S OFFER.

IF we have not said much about Mrs. Chine lately, it is not because that good lady was any less active than she had been of old.

She still kept a careful watch upon the Plaintons, and took incredible pains to know when and where they visited. She seized every opportunity of getting in the curate's way, and holding him as long as possible in conversation. She made frivolous calls at his lodgings as often as she dared, ostensibly on parish matters, but really to see what information she could pick up, and to insinuate some scandal with regard to her neighbours.

A day or two after Plainton's visit to Dar-

gal Lodge, recorded in the last chapter, he received the following remarkable, but anonymous, note :

‘ Beware of the gambler’s daughter at Dargal Lodge. The family live by thieving, and are all low characters. Beware !’

It was written in a disguised hand, but Plainton had scarcely a doubt that it emanated from Mrs. Chine ; yet he could not be quite sure, and rather than run the risk of making a mistake in taxing her with it, he let it pass without notice.

A week later Miss Plainton received an early visit from Mrs. Chine. After a great many civil speeches, she at length disclosed the object of her coming.

‘ My dear, I want to ask a favour of you. I have thought for a long time that I should like to make your brother a present to show how much I appreciate his preaching, and I wish to ask you, if you think he would accept Chine’s diamond ring. He always wore it on his little finger, my dear, and I think I should like to see it on your brother’s beauti-

ful hand. It would so remind me of Chine.'

'I am afraid, Mrs. Chine, that my brother could not possibly accept it.'

'It's of no use to me, my dear. I should never sell it.'

'No, but if Mr. Plainton accepted a ring from you, he could not refuse one from anybody else, and as he could not wear them all it would be awkward.'

'So it would, my dear, I quite see that. "Unto every one that hath shall be given," the Bible says ; still it does not say it would not be awkward.'

'That has nothing to do with it.'

'Certainly not, my dear. It is only a parallel case, though not connected with the other.'

Knowing from past experience that conversation of any character only served to prolong Mrs. Chine's unwelcome visits, Margaret prudently remained perfectly silent.

After a very long pause Mrs. Chine started afresh.

‘ I notice your dear brother uses steel spectacles. I wonder he does not have gold.’

‘ Well, for one reason, they are too expensive, and——’

‘ Ah ! my dear, I thought you would say so. I have brought with me Chine’s gold pair he was so fond of’—pulling out of her pocket a spectacle case. Now the glasses would not suit your brother’s eyes, but he could have fresh ones put in, and it would look so much better to see him in gold spectacles, and would so remind me of poor Chine.’

‘ I think I may undertake to say that Mr. Plainton, although feeling grateful for your kindness, could not possibly accept them.’

‘ Well, perhaps it would be troubling him too much to have them altered, but I would get them done, if I knew the number of the glasses he wears.’

‘ I do not think under any circumstances that Mr. Plainton would take them.’

‘ Just like him ! So unselfish.’

Finding that no impression whatever could

be made upon Margaret, the good lady retired.

Some time after this Mrs. Chine called again. She was dressed more splendidly than ever. She wore a blue silk dress, a fashionable white hat trimmed with ruby velvet, and surmounted by an immense green plume. Round her neck was tied, after the manner of the young girls of the period, a pink kerchief; across her ample shoulders was thrown a thin yellow scarf worked with flowers of divers colours, whilst her large but well-shaped hands were enclosed in lavender kid gloves. Her bosom was ornamented with an immense brooch containing a coloured photograph of the late Mr. Chine.

When Margaret entered the room, on hearing of her arrival, she started back in astonishment on beholding the gorgeous and varied scene her visitor presented. Mrs. Chine was delighted to see the evident impression her appearance had made on Margaret.

‘ The first time of putting them on, my dear.

Quite new, I assure you—and very expensive, too !

‘So I should think,’ gasped Margaret, trying to recover her breath.

‘I believe my dress, scarf, and hat are the first of the kind in Pollington. In fact, they are hardly known in Paris yet.’

‘I dare say not.’

‘I shall wear them all in church next Sunday ; and if Lady Carmine or any of her people are there, they will see then that we don’t copy them like a parcel of servants, as I am sure they think we all are.’

‘They certainly will see you do not copy them.’

‘I like to show my independence—in those matters, my dear,’ she added, just in time ; ‘but in spiritual things we ought all to be very humble, as I know your dear brother would say.’

‘He would not say that you were to separate your religion from your daily life.’

Margaret feared from appearances that her visitor intended to make a long stay, and

from the serious look which gradually came into her face she anticipated a more than usually important communication. It was far more important than she could have supposed.

After beginning a long way off, Mrs. Chine gradually worked round to the main purpose of her visit.

‘My dear, owing to the atrocious conduct of our wicked Vicar—who I do not think will last out much longer, he breaks so every day—we have not been enabled to get up another testimonial for your brother. For I do not consider the necklet and locket given to you is any benefit to him, which I know you will excuse me for saying. I have been thinking that if you are running short——’

‘Really, Mrs. Chine, I cannot allow you to speak of our private affairs.’

‘Certainly not, my dear. “Do not your alms before men,” I quite agree in.’

‘I wish——’

‘One minute, my dear. I am sure you will excuse me when you know what I am going

to say. The parish have been wondering when your brother would get married.'

Margaret here looked at her visitor in dazed astonishment, while the latter, who had at first felt very nervous, but had now managed to screw her courage to the sticking-place, hastened to get out all she had to say.

'They expect it of him, and they do say that the parish will go on much better if he has an experienced lady to take charge of him, whilst you go on with your visiting——'

'Good heavens!'

'One moment, my dear. You know I have had two husbands, so I know what men are, and I have always had the welfare of the parish at heart as well as the happiness of your dear brother. Now, you are aware that I have £200 a year clear, besides the furniture and plate in my house; and as I think your dear brother likes me, and everything seems to fit in so providentially, what I wanted to say is this—if he thought proper to propose to me I should accept him, and should not object to your living in the same house with

us, if you did not interfere with the servants. With his salary as curate and my £200 we might do very[nicely.]’

Margaret had been too much astonished to interrupt Mrs. Chine in her magnanimous offer, and when the benevolent lady had quite finished and paused for a reply, she still sat looking at her in speechless amazement.

Mrs. Chine was sufficiently gratified by the unmistakable effect produced by her disinterested offer, and sat with a complacent smile on her face while she modestly looked down her nose.

At length Margaret began :

‘ Mrs. Chine, you must be mad !’

‘ Oh no, my dear, I quite mean it. It is no more than you both deserve. You know it says, whatever a man gives up for the sake of religion he shall have back a hundredfold. And I am sure your dear brother has done without a wife long enough. Not that I should wish to see him rewarded a hundredfold in that matter, as that certainly would be far from pleasant, and sometimes awkward !’

‘How dreadful!’ exclaimed Margaret, not yet recovered.

‘And expensive, too, my dear, unless he took them one at a time and they died off very quick. Though a hundred is a good many for one man. I never heard of more than seven.’

‘Mrs. Chine, you are a born idiot!’

The generous lady looked up in some surprise.

‘Your behaviour,’ continued Margaret, ‘is perfectly scandalous, and you ought to be shut up in Bedlam!’

Mrs. Chine saw that Margaret was quite in earnest, and began to shed copious tears.

‘My dear, you are very hard upon me,’ she sobbed.

‘I wish I could teach you to talk like a reasonable being.’

‘Oh! I thought it was the grammar. I never could learn it, never! But I thought it best to come and speak, because my handwriting is rather weak, and I am not sure of my spelling; else I would have sent a letter instead.’

Margaret sighed wearily and said :

‘It is quite hopeless to talk to you. After all the snubbings you have had, to think that you should come with such an outrageous offer. Monstrous !’

‘Is there nothing you will let me do for your dear brother, after all he has done for us !’

‘Nothing, except to keep out of his way.’

‘Well, I do not see very much of him except in church.’

‘And you are likely to see less.’

‘Oh ! don’t say so. You would not wish to bring down my grey hairs (there are only a few which are grey, my dear; the rest are as brown as yours) with sorrow to the grave.’

‘I wish you would cease your irreverent quotations.’

‘Certainly, my dear. I hope you do not mean to cut yourself off from me.’

‘I am not sure.’

‘That would not be showing a Christian spirit.’

‘I cannot have my precious time wasted in this manner.’

‘No, my dear, I am just going. I am only waiting till you have come round a bit. “Let not the sun go down——”’ here Mrs. Chine, recollecting Margaret’s rebuke, coughed and left her quotation unfinished.

‘If you are not offended,’ she continued, ‘you will promise to come up to dinner one day.’

‘I will think about it. I will not promise now.’

‘Quite right, my dear; always take your time, as Chine used to say. Good-bye. You can leave a note out for Anne to-morrow.’

And the good lady departed in cheerful spirits.

As she went down the road she met Plain ton, going with Ethel and Maud towards Brackley. Mrs. Chine did not approve of the Templetons, and therefore very quickly crossed the road to avoid them, looking intently at the sky over her shoulder so as not to see them.

As this particular day became a memorable one in the recollections of the curate, it is necessary to give a more detailed account of it.

At the end of June, Ethel and Maud had come home for the holidays. Plainton called to see them soon after. They were both very eager to meet him. He had been several times to Overshot with Mrs. Templeton and other members of the family whilst the children had been away, and had continued to write to Ethel, who told him all her little school troubles, and received his advice and encouragement in return.

Again the thought which had come into his mind six months ago, returned with increased force. Ethel would soon cease to be a child, and their pleasant, unrestrained intercourse must come to an end. Would it not be well to begin now to treat her less as a child, and to accustom her to see him less frequently?

This thought occupied his mind for several anxious nights, and he determined at last to act upon it.

For the first fortnight during which Plainton was putting this resolution in force, not much notice was taken by Ethel. He called only once or twice, but did not stay long. At the end of the third week of the vacation he met the two children by the river.

‘Mr. Plainton,’ said Ethel, running up to him, ‘are you never coming to take us out again? You have quite deserted us.’

‘Not quite, Ethel.’

‘It seems like it. It is an age since you took us to Brackley. Why do you not come for us?’ she asked with tears in her eyes.

‘Because, my child, I think I ought not to come too often.’

Ethel opened her eyes very wide.

‘You do not come too often. Why do you think so?’ she rejoined, looking up wonderingly into Plainton’s grave face.

‘I think it is better I should not come quite so much now.’

‘Why do you think it is better you should not come quite so much now?’

‘Well,’ said he, slowly, ‘you are about to

grow into a woman, you know, and will have to give up running about the fields like a little girl.'

'I am not about to grow into a woman,' said she, tearfully; 'not till I have my hair done up,' shaking her long locks off her shoulders. 'And it is very unkind of you to say so.'

'And mamma says you are very unkind as well,' put in Maud.

'No, Maud, she did not quite say that,' remarked her sister.

'Ah! but she meant it though,' rejoined the other, with a look of profound wisdom.

Plainton still seemed quite unmoved.

'I suppose,' continued Ethel, pouting her lips and tossing her head, 'while we have been away you have found some one else to take out, and do not want us now.'

The droll air of injured merit with which this was said completely upset Plainton's gravity, and he burst out laughing as he said:

'You are the funniest little woman I ever met.'

Ethel was delighted. The stern look had vanished from his face, and she was content. Childlike, she cared not to know the origin and source of the clouds now that sunshine had come.

‘Am I, Mr. Plainton?’ she rejoined, shaking her mane again with a satisfied air; ‘I am glad you think so, if it pleases you.’

They had now arrived at the Manor House. Plainton stopped to say good-bye. He would not go in.’

‘Then you will come for us to-morrow, will you not?’

‘Oh! no. I did not say so.’

‘But do come, please.’

Plainton wavered.

‘Please, Mr. Plainton,’ taking hold of his hand.

‘Well, I will think about it.’

‘Don’t think about it, please, because then you won’t come.’

‘I cannot come to-morrow.’

‘When will you, then?’

‘Next week.’

‘On what day?’

‘Monday.’

‘Thank you so much. You are good.’

Plainton resolved to gratify Ethel's desire this once. It would probably be the last time that he would be able to take her and Maud out, as had been his wont. In another week Ethel and Kate were going to stay with an uncle in Yorkshire. Before they returned he would probably be away for his own brief holiday, and then the children would be going to school again.

Once more he would ramble with them through Brackley Park, enjoying all the delights of sight and sound which were there to be found. He would make it a joyous day for them. For the last time he would cast aside all sad and painful thoughts as to the future, and have that day engraven on his memory; though the last thus spent in childish sport, yet the brightest and best.

On the appointed morning he came to the Manor House. He met Kate in the hall, who, with a roguish twinkle in her eye, said :

‘ Oh ! you runaway, here you are at last :
Ethel ! your truant has come ! ’

Ethel came dancing along to meet him, her face radiant with the anticipation of the day’s pleasure.

‘ How bright your hair is this morning, Ethel ! What have you been doing to it ? ’

‘ Don’t you know ? Oh ! it’s because I am going out with you to-day ! ’

‘ Well, come along ! The sun is shining splendidly, and there is a beautiful air stirring. ’

They put up some sandwiches, and took two flasks of claret, and then set forth.

As they went towards the river they saw Mrs. Chine, as already related.

Having crossed the stream, they were soon rambling through the meadows towards Brackley. Arrived in the park, they made their way through the bracken and came to the pool, where they watched the bright fish luxuriating in its clear depths.

They wandered about over hill and through dell, plucking the wild flowers, and adorning one another with ample wreaths. When time

had come for luncheon, having chosen a wide-spreading oak, they seated themselves under its grateful shade while they disposed of their refreshment. There they remained long, watching the fleecy clouds, the waving branches of the trees, and the infinite effects of the sunlight on the varied hues gleaming everywhere around them.

Plainton told them some new allegories and laughable stories, and they were as happy as they had ever been. When evening had come and the long shadows were beginning to fall they returned to the Manor House, and adjourned once more to the school-room, where the usual meal was spread.

As Plainton walked home that night he felt that the last of these happy days was gone.

He found a note from Mr. Hatter awaiting him, asking him to go over to the Vicarage next morning.

He went after breakfast, and was shown into the study, where he found the Vicar expecting him.

‘I wanted to tell you that I have had several answers to my advertisement for another curate, and have at length chosen the man I think likely to suit.’

‘I am glad to hear that.’

‘His name is Hercules Steptoe, and he is a Yorkshireman of good family and large means.’

‘When is he coming?’

‘I have urged him to come as soon as possible, and it will be as well to settle what work we shall give him to do. Now what would you like to give him? Please yourself entirely. You may have him to take equal shares with you of everything; or, if you prefer it, you can give him all the dirty work to do, such things as you dislike or do not care to undertake.’

‘I should not like to give a fellow-curate anything to do I would not do myself.’

‘Well, please yourself. If I were in your place I should give him the deviling to do, and keep only the pick of the work for myself.’

‘It would be much nicer to give him an equal share of each kind of work.’

‘You would like him, then, to take the pulpit equally with yourself?’

‘Certainly.’

‘And the visiting?’

‘Let him have his choice. But if he has been only a year or two in orders I had better take Bott’s Lane and the streets adjacent, as we have there a more difficult class of people than the rural poor in the Molton, Tonford, and Plashley Roads.’

‘We must make him work. He is as strong as a horse, from his appearance. We must find him a lodging too, where he will be well fed, and then we shall be able to keep him quite up to the mark. I think of asking Mrs. Chine to take him in.’

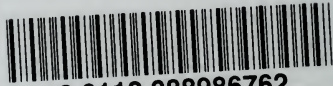
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